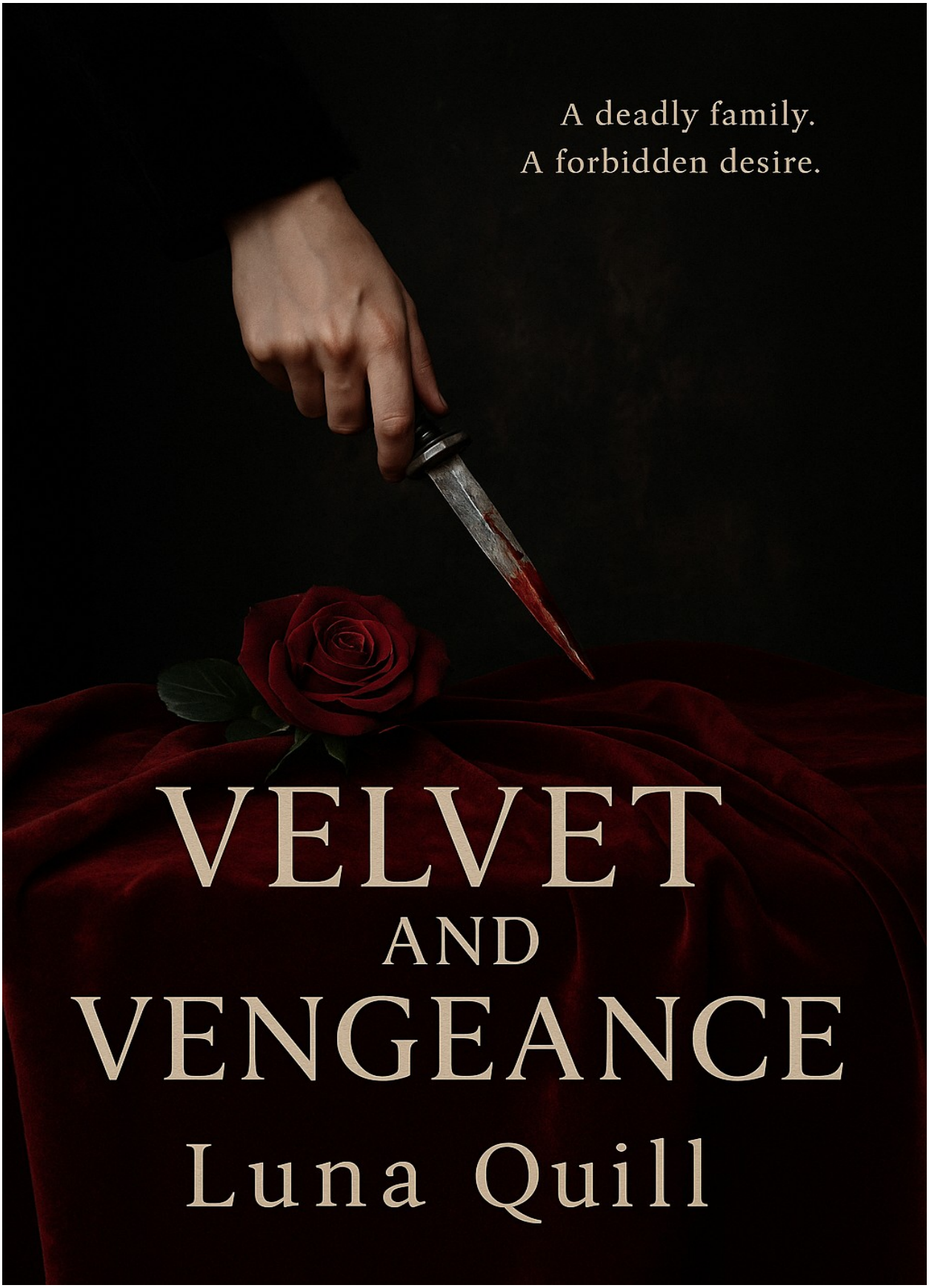
A deadly family.
A forbidden desire.
VELVET
AND
VENGEANCE
Luna Quill

Characters

Main Characters

Alessandro Moretti

The Heir. Age: 34

The oldest of the six Moretti brothers. Cold, calculating, and fiercely loyal to the family legacy. Groomed to be the Don, Alessandro hides a storm of emotion under a flawless exterior. A master strategist and killer when necessary but deep inside, he’s haunted by choices made in the shadows.

Isabella Romano

The Stranger. Age: 28

Mysterious, intelligent, and fiercely independent. She has a secret that could shatter the Moretti Empire. Sent to Milan under pretenses, Isabella didn’t expect to fall for the man she came to betray. But nothing about Alessandro is predictable least of all his heart.

The Moretti Brothers

Luca Moretti

The Enforcer. Age: 32

Ruthless, sharp-tongued, and the family's clean-up man. He lives for the thrill of the fight and hides his trauma behind sarcasm and short-term flings.

Matteo Moretti

The Diplomat. Age: 30

The calm, silver-tongued negotiator. Manages business fronts and politics. Always has a glass of whiskey in one hand and a secret in the other.

Dante Moretti

The Wild One. Age: 28

Impulsive, charming, and dangerous. He’s the brother most likely to start a war or fall in love with the wrong woman. Fire and recklessness personified.

Enzo Moretti

The Hacker. Age: 26

The tech genius and surveillance expert. Keeps to himself but sees everything. Socially awkward but deadly behind a screen.

Nico Moretti

The Shadow. Age: 24

Youngest and quietest of the brothers. Trained in covert operations, he’s an assassin when needed. Loyal to his brothers but hides a darkness no one talks about.

Supporting Characters

Don Vittorio Moretti

Father of the brothers. Retired boss.

A legend in the Italian underworld. Still pulls strings from the shadows, but trusts Alessandro to lead. Ruthless, traditional, and silently manipulative.

Elena Bianchi

Family advisor and old friend of the Moretti’s.

Acts as a mother figure after the death of their mother. Elegant, wise, and protective especially of Alessandro.

Giovanni Russo

Enemy Don.

Rival to the Moretti’s. Wants control of Milan. Dangerous, strategic, and willing to use anyone especially Isabella to break the Moretti’s from within.

Chapter One: Alessandro

The night tasted like smoke, blood, and memory.

From twenty floors above, Milan looked peaceful—beautiful, even. The rain-slick streets below glowed under amber lights, the kind of glow that made tourists believe this city still had a soul. But I knew better.

There was no soul here. Only power, debts, and silence.

I stood alone on the balcony of my penthouse, a glass of scotch in one hand, a cigarette burning slowly in the other. The city was mine. Or at least it would be. One day soon, when the old ghosts stepped aside and left me the throne.

The empire wasn't handed to you. You bled for it. You killed for it. You buried your softness six feet under and smiled at the funeral.

My phone buzzed in my jacket pocket, but I didn't check it. If it was urgent, Luca would come himself.

He always did.

Behind me, the party carried on in expensive murmurs—tailored suits, red lipstick, fake smiles. One of our legitimate fronts had just closed a deal with a fashion house in Rome. Millions were moving. Papers were signed. Champagne flowed. Everyone celebrated.

Except me.

I wasn't in the mood to drink with snakes wearing silk ties. They raised glasses to my name and whispered threats when I left the room.

I'd learned to let them whisper. Dead men always whisper.

"Boss," Luca's voice broke through the quiet. He stepped onto the balcony, his shirt half-buttoned, tie loose. "Thought I'd find you out here."

I didn't look at him. "News?"

"Russo's man showed up at the port. Same guy, we flagged last week."

I inhaled deeply. "What happened?"

"He's not going home."

A pause.

"Messy?" I asked.

"Not too messy. Matteo smoothed it over with the port authority. Enzo scrubbed the cameras. No trail."

I finally turned to face him. "And the body?"

"Handled."

I gave a curt nod. “Good. That’s one less problem.”

Luca leaned on the railing next to me, flicking a lighter open and shut. He had the same black hair and cold eyes as me, but he never bothered to hide the violence in his smile. “You missed the speech,” he said.

“I didn’t have anything worth saying.”

He laughed under his breath. “You’re the new face of the family. You could have said buona sera and they’d still kiss your ring.”

I didn’t reply. I knew what I was. And I didn’t need applause.

“They’re calling you Il Principe di Milano, you know,” Luca added with a grin. “The Prince of Milan.”

“Princes inherit. I take.”

“Still. Has a nice ring to it.”

He left a moment later, probably to find a girl and forget about blood for a few hours. I envied him that. I hadn’t felt something like escape in years.

And that’s when I saw her.

Through the glass doors, standing just past the bar — a woman I didn’t know.

That was rare. I knew everyone. Every daughter of every politician, every mistress of every rival Don, every woman ambitious enough to want a piece of the Moretti name.

But her? She didn’t move like someone from this world. She stood still while everyone else circled, like the eye of a storm.

Red dress. Black hair. Eyes too sharp to be innocent. A beauty carved from danger.

Her gaze swept across the room, disinterested, until it landed on me.

And for a moment—just one second—it stayed.

Unflinching.

Unimpressed.

Unaware that she’d just become the most dangerous thing in this room.

I crushed my cigarette underfoot and stepped inside.

Chapter Two: Isabella

The silk stuck to my skin like a lie.

Red—because someone once told me men in power respond to blood-colored things. I didn't wear it for them. I wore it because it made me feel like I could cut someone without lifting a blade.

The Moretti penthouse was everything I expected: extravagant, cold, and humming with danger just beneath the polished surface. The kind of place where beauty masked brutality. Every smile held a secret, every glance held a weight I couldn't afford to carry.

I had walked into a den of wolves wearing a lamb's perfume.

And they believed it.

So far.

I kept my posture relaxed, fingers resting lightly around a glass of sparkling water—because champagne blurred the senses, and I needed all of mine sharpened tonight. Eyes scanned the room with precise calculation, but not too obviously. I couldn't afford to look like I was watching. Couldn't afford to look like I belonged, either. My entire game depended on the balance between too much and not enough.

Then I saw him.

Alessandro Moretti.

He wasn't like the others. Not like the leering men in silk or the whispering women dripping diamonds. No, he stood alone on a high balcony like a statue carved out of shadow. Controlled. Silent. Regal in a way that felt… dangerous.

Every inch of him screamed power. The kind that didn't need to be spoken out loud. The kind that had already buried men for less than a mistake.

He didn't watch the party.

He watched the city like it was a chessboard.

I'd seen pictures of him, of course. Knew his file by heart. Oldest of six. Next in line. Cold as marble, smart as hell. Known to take care of problems with the precision of a surgeon and the soul of a ghost.

But pictures didn't prepare you for presence.

He moved like a man who didn't need to look over his shoulder because no one would dare approach it. He exhaled smoke like a promise. And when he finally stepped inside the room again, I felt the air tighten around my throat.

It was too early for him to notice me. I hadn't made my move yet.

But he had seen me.

Worse—he had marked me.

I turned away before our eyes could lock again, pretending to listen to the man next to me, a slick-talking investor who thought I was someone's cousin from Florence. I nodded when I had to, smiled when it felt appropriate, and gave just enough to keep suspicion away.

Inside, my heart beat like thunder.

I had prepared for this night for months. Every detail of my identity was crafted, forged, and polished. The dress. The accent. The false job history. The carefully placed connection that got me on the guest list.

But nothing prepared me for the moment he looked at me like he already knew I didn't belong.

This was not part of the plan.

I was supposed to get in, stay quiet, and gather information. Not draw the eye of the most dangerous man in Milan.

And yet, when his footsteps crossed the marble, getting closer, something in me refused to run.

I wanted to meet him.

No. Needed to.

Because beneath the mission, beneath the lies and revenge and the weight of everything I came here to do… there was something else.

Curiosity. Heat. Something dark.

And that terrified me more than anything else in the room.

Chapter Three: Alessandro

The air changed when I stepped back into the room.

It always did.

Sometimes it was respect.

Other times, fear.

Tonight, it was something different.

Curiosity.

The kind that slithered.

I moved slowly, deliberately, cutting through the crowd like a blade. The music dulled into a background hum as I scanned the faces. Too many of them were forgettable. Too many smiled too quickly. But not her.

She wasn’t smiling now.

The woman in the crimson dress had turned her body slightly toward the bar, feigning interest in whatever low-level pawn had trapped her in conversation. But I saw the tension in her spine, the careful stillness of her fingers against the glass. She wasn’t nervous. She was controlled.

There’s a difference.

She was watching everything without looking at anything too long

I’d seen that once before—in soldiers trained to kill quietly.

And in snakes.

I moved to the opposite end of the bar, not close enough to draw suspicion, not far enough to lose the moment. I could feel her eyes shift—just briefly—as if checking her perimeter.

Smart girl.

I nodded at the bartender without speaking. He handed me a fresh drink like he’d been waiting for the signal. Bourbon, is neat. No garnish. No conversation.

I let the silence build. Let her feel me before she heard me.

Sometimes, presence was louder than words.

She turned slightly again. Just enough that her profile was visible.

She had the kind of beauty that made men stupid. But she carried it like a burden, not a weapon. That intrigued me more than it should have.

I took a slow sip.

Still, I didn’t speak.

Not yet.

The men she was talking to drifted off—one of them trying to look back without being obvious. She didn't stop them. She didn't look relieved either

She was waiting.

The moment hung there between us like smoke.

And finally, I took it.

"You're not from Milan."

Her eyes met mine. Not startled. Not impressed.

Just sharp.

"No," she said. Her voice was velvet and cautious. "Should I be?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Whether you like playing with fire."

She held my gaze. No flinch. No coyness.

"Do you consider yourself the flame?" she asked.

I smiled—just a little. "No. Fire consumes. I prefer control."

"I see," she said. "So… you're the one who holds the match."

There it was. The spark.

Not flirtation.

Challenge.

I studied her a little more closely. No jewelry. Just a slim silver bracelet on her left wrist—real silver, scratched faintly like it had been worn often. Not decorative. Sentimental.

Her heels were expensive but worn at the back. Either she'd walked in them too far, or they weren't hers to begin with.

Her accent was Italian, northern, but softened by something else. Something deliberate. She was hiding her origin.

Which meant one thing: she didn't want to be found.

Interesting.

I took another drink. "Your name?"

"Isabella," she said, simply. "And yours?"

“You already know it.”

There was the first crack in the calm. A tiny flicker in her eyes—like she hadn’t expected me to say it out loud.

“I try not to assume,” she said. “Names carry weight in this city.”

“Especially mine.”

We stood there in silence for a beat longer. She didn’t ask for details. Didn’t play the fool. I respected that.

Still, she was hiding something.

And I wanted to know what.

But not tonight.

Not all at once.

Thirty seconds more and I stepped back, not breaking eye contact.

“Enjoy the party, Isabella.”

“I doubt it,” she said softly. “But thank you.

As I turned away, I caught the faintest smile tug at the corner of her mouth.

Not warmth. Not amusement.

It was the smile of a woman who had just opened a door she knew she shouldn't have.

And stepped through anyway.

Chapter Four: Isabella

I shouldn’t have looked back.

But I did.

Just once. Just for a moment. Enough to catch a final glimpse of him as he disappeared into the crowd like a shadow slipping beneath the skin of the night.

Alessandro Moretti.

He was everything they said—and nothing like I expected.

I had imagined arrogance. Brutality. Cold control honed into violence. But instead, he was quiet. Watchful. Dangerous in a way that required no display. He didn’t project power.

He embodied it.

And when he said my name, I felt the cracks begin.

Isabella.

I’d chosen the name for its elegance, its familiarity. It was simple. Safe. Not uncommon in a place like this. But when he said it, it didn’t feel like a disguise anymore.

It felt like a warning.

I slipped away from the bar without drawing attention, weaving through the clusters of high society like a thread through silk. Smiles. Nods. Not too fast. Not too slow. A performance down to the breath.

My heels clicked against the marble as I turned toward the corridor near the elevators. I could still feel him. Like he had stitched something into my spine with his eyes. I hated that.

But I hated what came next more.

I stepped into the bathroom and locked the door behind me. The silence was deafening. The crystal chandelier hummed faintly above as I leaned over the sink and stared at myself in the mirror

And there she was.

The girl behind the red dress.

The spy behind the smile

The traitor.

I dug into my clutch and pulled out the burner phone. One press. One ring. No more.

The line clicked.

“You’re late,” a low voice said on the other end.

I closed my eyes. “I made contact.”

A beat of silence.

“With him?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He noticed me. Spoke to me. Nothing direct. But he’s curious.”

A breath. Not hers. His.

Luciano Russo.

I hadn’t spoken his name aloud in months.

I didn’t need to.

“You’re doing well, Bella, but don’t let him see too much,” he said, his voice coiled like a whip in the dark. “Alessandro’s not like the others. He studies people before he kills them.”

“I know who he is,” I said.

“Do you?” His tone sharpened. “Because I saw the footage. I saw the way you looked at him. Don’t let the suit and cheekbones fool you. That man would slit your throat before you could say please.”

I bit down on the tremor rising in my chest.

“I haven’t forgotten why I’m here,” I said quietly.

There was another pause. This one is longer.

“I hope not,” Russo said. “Because when the time comes, you’re going to have to choose between finishing this job… and walking away.”

I knew what he meant.

And I hated that he was right.

“Did you get anything useful?” he asked finally.

“Not yet,” I said. “But I think I’m in. He doesn’t trust me. But he noticed me. That’s the start.”

“Good,” he murmured. “Keep working him. Learn his patterns. Find his weakness. Every man has one.”

The line went dead.

I stared at the black screen for a long time after that. My hands clenched tight around the phone. I didn’t want to admit the truth—not to him, not to myself.

Because Alessandro Moretti was supposed to be my enemy.

But the way he looked at me...

He didn’t see a threat.

He didn’t see a toy.

He saw a puzzle.

And I think part of me wanted him to solve it.

I shoved the phone back into my clutch and pressed cold water against my neck. The woman in the mirror didn’t blink. She’d done worse things than lie to a Moretti. She’d watched men die and said nothing.

This wasn’t different.

This couldn’t be different.

I dried my hands, smoothed the red silk down my sides, and stepped back into the world I was learning to pretend I belonged to.

And as I walked away, I heard his voice echo in my mind.

“Do you like playing with fire?”

I’d lied when I didn’t answer.

Because the truth was worse.

I wasn’t afraid of the fire.

I was starting to crave it.

Chapter Five: Alessandro

The city never slept, but I sometimes wished it would.

At least then I could think without distraction.

The glass walls of my penthouse stretched like a wound across the skyline. From here, Milan looked peaceful—distant lights blinking like dying stars, streets whispering secrets too small for anyone else to hear.

But I heard them.

I always did.

I lit a cigarette, not because I needed it, but because it gave my hands something to do while my mind worked. The smoke curled in the silence like a ghost refusing to leave.

And still—her face wouldn't fade.

Isabella.

I didn’t trust her. Not for a second.

She was too poised. Too perfect. Every detail crafted like a story meant to be believed. Women like that didn’t appear by accident—not in my world. Not in my home.

But something about her… didn’t match the file.

That was the problem.

There was no file.

I’d had Matteo dig through every guest name tonight—every connection, every cousin of a cousin of a cousin. She wasn’t on the official list. Someone had slipped her in.

That wasn’t an oversight.

That was intentional.

There was a knock at the door behind me.

I didn’t turn around. “Come in.”

Luca stepped in, jacket off, sleeves rolled up. He didn’t look like the second-oldest son of Milan’s most feared family tonight. He looked like what he used to be—my little brother. Restless. Sharp. A little too quick to pull the trigger.

“She’s already got you pacing, doesn’t she?” he said.

I didn’t answer.

He poured himself a drink and dropped onto the leather armchair like he belonged there. He did, of course. This wasn't the kind of family where we locked each other out. Not unless we had a reason.

"You didn't flirt with her," he said after a beat. "That's how I knew something was wrong. Usually if a woman's beautiful, you charm her. But with her? You looked at her like a problem."

"She is one," I said quietly.

Luca raised an eyebrow. "You think she's a plant?"

"I know she is."

"By who?"

"That's what I don't know yet."

He leaned forward, setting his glass down. "Want me to follow her?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because if you follow her, she'll know. And if she knows, she'll disappear. I want to know why she came before she runs."

Luca gave a low whistle. "She must be special."

"She's dangerous," I corrected. "But careful. Doesn't drink. Doesn't flirt. Doesn't ask too many questions. She's playing a role, and she's good at it."

He smirked. "You almost sound impressed."

That made me look at him.

"I don't get impressed, Luca. I get suspicious. There's a difference."

He lifted his hands in surrender. "Fine. You want me to keep Matteo out of it?"

"For now."

"And what if she is working for someone? What if she's trying to get close to you?"

"Then she'll succeed."

Luca blinked. "Wait—what?"

I crushed the cigarette in the ashtray.

"If she wants to get close," I said slowly, "I'll let her. Because when people get close… they slip. They reveal things."

"And when she does?"

"Then she'll learn the cost of walking into the lion's den."

Luca stood up, his smirk fading. “Just be careful, fratello. You’ve got enough ghosts already.”

I nodded once, and he left without another word

When the door shut behind him, I looked out over the city again.

This time, I didn’t see buildings or lights.

I saw her.

Eyes too calm.

Voice too smooth.

A storm hiding behind silk.

Who sent you, Isabella?

And more dangerously—why the hell do I want to see you again?

Chapter Six: Isabella

The cold water didn’t help.

It never did, really. I splashed it against my face anyway, watching the droplets slide down porcelain skin that no longer felt like mine.

I had worn a hundred masks before.

But this one was starting to fit too well.

Alessandro Moretti.

His name alone should’ve frozen the blood in my veins. Should’ve made it easier to hate him—to keep the distance. But the man behind the reputation was… different.

Too quiet. Too calculated. Too in control.

But something in his eyes burned.

Not with rage.

Not with cruelty.

With curiosity.

And worse—recognition.

As if he’d seen a version of me once, in another life

I pulled the silver bracelet off my wrist and set it down on the nightstand. It was heavy tonight, heavier than usual. Maybe because it reminded me why I was here.

Why I couldn’t afford to lose focus.

I lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling of the small apartment Russo had secured for me in the city’s historic quarter. It was modest, untraceable, tucked away like a secret. Just like me.

The burner phone buzzed softly on the pillow beside me.

I didn’t answer it.

I already knew who it was.

Russo never waited more than a day. Not after contact had been made. He was always watching from the shadows, always one whisper away from pulling the trigger himself if I didn’t do it fast enough.

But this wasn’t supposed to take one night.

I knew how to get inside men's heads. Knew how to become whatever they needed. Soft. Vulnerable. Mysterious. I could disarm a man faster with a lie than with a bullet.

But Alessandro wasn’t interested in softness.

He was interested in control.

And so was I.

That’s the game, I reminded myself. You get close, you earn trust, and then you burn it to the ground.

That had always been the plan.

Except… I wasn’t sure if I could anymore.

He didn’t touch me.

Didn’t flirt.

Didn’t ask for a name.

He simply saw me.

And worse, he didn’t believe me.

That made him dangerous.

And dangerously magnetic.

I sat up slowly, wrapping the silk robe tighter around myself as I crossed the room and opened the notebook hidden inside the dresser drawer. It was coded, layered with false symbols and patterns only I could read.

I opened to a blank page and wrote one sentence.

He knows.

Then I hesitated—and added another:

But I don’t think he wants me to leave.

The thought made my stomach turn.

Because if he did want me to leave, I wouldn’t be alive right now.

And if he didn’t…

Then maybe I wasn’t the only one playing with fire.

Chapter Seven: Alessandro

Trust was currency in this world.

And I didn’t spend mine lightly.

I sat at the head of the long, carved mahogany table in the private dining room of Villa Moretti, the family estate just outside the city. The walls were lined with oil paintings and old secrets, and the chandelier above flickered softly with real fire.

My brothers took their usual places.

Luca, to my right—impatient, sharp-eyed, always half-ready to argue

Matteo, the third in line, leaned back in his seat with a glass of Barolo and an amused smirk. He played the fool. He wasn’t. He rarely spoke, but when he did, you listened.

Giovanni, the fourth—deadpan, deadly. The cleaner. If I gave the order, Gio made the problem vanish.

And finally, the twins—Nico and Raffaele. Youngest, most reckless, but loyal to the bone. Still learning, and still hungry.

Six sons.

Six weapons.

One empire.

The table fell quiet as I folded my hands in front of me. Outside, the dogs barked once—a signal. The perimeter was clear.

“She was at the gala,” I said.

They knew who I meant.

Luca scoffed. “You’re still on this girl?”

“She’s not a girl. She’s a variable,” I said calmly. “And in our line of work, variables are dangerous.”

“Or useful,” Matteo added, raising his glass.

I glanced at him. “We’ll see.”

“She got in under someone’s name,” Gio said, speaking for the first time. “Fake invitation. Possibly forged ID. We ran facial rec—nothing. Either she doesn’t exist… or she’s been erased.”

My jaw tightened. That confirmed it.

She wasn’t a curious guest.

She was a deliberate move.

“The question is,” Raffaele chimed in, “who sent her? The Marciano’s?”

“They don’t have the balls,” Luca muttered.

“Could be Russo,” Giovanni said flatly.

The room went still.

That name still scraped like broken glass across my skin.

“Russo’s been quiet since the port incident,” Nico said. “Too quiet.”

“Which means he’s planning something,” I murmured. “And maybe this woman is the opening act.”

A silence passed between us.

Then I leaned forward. “I’m inviting her to lunch.”

Five pairs of eyes turned to me at once.

Luca blinked. “I’m sorry, what?”

“She wants in,” I said. “She’s trying to figure out where the cracks are. So I’ll show her a few. Ones I control.”

“You’re letting a possible spy into the lion’s den,” Giovanni warned.

“No,” I said. “I’m baiting the trap.”

Matteo grinned. “You always did prefer chess to war.”

“She’ll come?” Raffaele asked.

“Oh,” I said. “She’ll come.”

That afternoon, I returned to the penthouse and sent the message myself. A handwritten invitation, hand-delivered by one of the staff. No digital trace. No paper trail.

She’d know it came from me.

She’d know it was a test

But I wanted to see what she’d do.

More importantly—I wanted to see what she’d try to hide.

And I already had a plan for what came next.

The invitation read:

> Lunch. Private terrace. Noon tomorrow. No excuses.

– A. Moretti

The game had begun. And I didn’t care how beautiful the piece looked.

If it turned out to be a blade…

I’d still be the one holding it when it struck.

Chapter Eight: Isabella

There was no envelope.

Just a folded card, ivory white, heavier than it looked.

It lay on the table like a challenge.

I stared at it for what felt like an hour before touching it. But my fingers already knew what it would say. His voice echoed in my mind even before I unfolded the page.

Lunch. Private terrace. Noon tomorrow. No excuses.

- A. Moretti

My heart slowed, not sped up. That was always how it worked for me-danger didn't excite me. It quieted everything inside me.

Made it sharper. Focused.

But this... wasn't just danger.

This was personal.

He was calling my bluff. Not with force, but with an invitation. A move that said: I see you. I don't trust you. But I want you close enough to find out why.

I slipped the note into my purse and walked to the window. From this side of the city, I could almost see the edge of the Moretti compound. The skyline divided like a blade-one half glittering wealth, the other, shadowed power.

Alessandro lived in both worlds.

And I was walking straight into his.

I waited until nightfall before contacting Russo.

The second phone was locked away in the lining of my coat-untraceable, off-grid. I used gloves when I touched it. Never left fingerprints. Never took risks.

His voice answered on the second ring.

"Well?" he said, as if he'd been waiting for me to break first.

"He made a move," I said. "Lunch. Private. Tomorrow."

There was a long pause. "Alone?"

"Yes."

He exhaled. "Then he's interested."

"No," I said. "He's watching me."

"Same thing," Russo muttered. "Keep him interested long enough to finish the job. That's all that matters."

But it wasn't. Not anymore.

"Alessandro's not like the others," I said quietly.

"That's exactly why he has to die."

His tone cut sharp, final.

And I remembered.

The blood on the floor of that old villa.

The night the house I loved burned because of a choice his father made.

Revenge had a name. And it wore the face of a man who looked like a god and spoke like a sinner.

Still... something inside me hesitated.

"I'm going," I said.

"Good. Charm him. Study him. And when the moment comes-end him."

He hung up.

I stood in silence, the dead line whispering in my ear like a ghost.

That night, I didn't sleep

I didn't dream.

I sat in front of the mirror and stared at myself.

Not the red lips. Not the dark eyes.

But the woman behind them.

Who was she, now?

A weapon?

A liar?

A survivor?

Or something far more dangerous-

Someone starting to feel.

Because as much as I hated Alessandro for what he represented...

For the blood on his hands, the empire he ruled, the family that destroyed mine...

He hadn't touched me.

Hadn't threatened me.

Hadn't fallen for the mask I wore.

He was waiting to see the real me.

And tomorrow, I'd have to give him just enough...

...without letting him see the part I was starting to lose control over.

The war hadn't started yet. But my pulse already knew the battlefield had shifted.

And now, I had to find a way to survive without losing myself in the fire.

Chapter Nine: Alessandro

Power didn't always roar.

Sometimes, it waited-silent, perfectly still-until someone walked straight into its teeth.

She was five minutes early.

That told me something.

I watched from the terrace window as she stepped out of the private elevator, heels clicking softly on marble. Not rushed, not hesitant. Measured. Like everything she did had been rehearsed twice-once in her mind, once in a mirror.

Smart.

But not perfect.

No one was perfect.

She wore deep green, silk again, but this time it was softer, less calculated. A contrast. A choice. She was playing with the image now, aware I was looking for the seams. And I was.

I opened the doors before she could knock.

"Miss..."

"Rossi," she offered, smoothly. "Elena Rossi."

A lie.

I gave her a small nod. "Come in."

The terrace overlooked the coastline, quiet and private, guarded by security at both entrances. No one could hear us. No one could save her, either.

Not that she seemed worried.

She took in the view like a woman who'd seen a thousand more impressive ones but still knew how to appreciate luxury. She sat only when I gestured, folding her hands loosely in her lap.

"You don't seem surprised," I said.

"That you invited me?"

"Yes.

"I assumed you would.

I raised a brow. "Confident."

She tilted her head, that unreadable smile flickering. "Curious."

"Are you always this poised when sitting across from criminals?"

She didn't flinch. "Are you always this direct with strangers?"

Touché.

The waiter appeared-discreet, trained, silent. He poured the wine and vanished without a word. I didn't need staff to hover. I needed silence to study her.

"I know you weren't on the guest list," I said finally, sipping. "And yet you managed to get into a private event hosted by one of Italy's most powerful families."

"Impressive, isn't it?"

"Suspicious."

"I prefer memorable."

That made me laugh. Not because it was funny, but because I knew her type.

Except I didn't. Not really.

Something in her was different. She wasn't just trained-she was refined, and precise, as if her entire identity had been built from pieces she selected herself. The problem was... even broken porcelain casts a beautiful silhouette.

I leaned forward, elbows on the table.

"Tell me, Elena. What do you want from me?"

She met my gaze. "Isn't that obvious?"

"No."

"I'm drawn to power."

Another half-truth.

She was drawing me in, yes-but not to seduce.

To study.

To dismantle.

"I can give you power," I said, voice low. "But it always comes with a cost."

"Everything does."

"Some costs are higher than others."

We were no longer talking about business.

Or identity.

Or danger.

We were circling something deeper. She knew it. I knew it. But neither of us would say it first.

The plate’s arrived-sea bass, lemon risotto, and cold salad. She barely touched hers. Another tell.

"You don't eat much," I observed.

"I don't trust food I didn't make myself."

"Then why come?"

Her eyes burned suddenly-just for a second.

"Because I had to know what kind of man invites the wolf into his home?"

Ah.

There it was.

She knew I knew.

And I knew she wasn't here by accident.

But the fact that she was still sitting here meant one thing-

She wasn't ready to run yet.

Or worse-she didn't want to

I set down my fork and stood slowly.

She followed suit, not missing a beat.

As I approached her, I didn't touch her. Just leaned in, close enough to whisper:

"I don't believe anything you've told me."

She didn't pull away.

"I wouldn't, either," she said.

Then, she turned and walked out.

Not fast.

Not afraid.

But not triumphant, either.

As if she knew she'd just survived the first cut...

But the blade was still in my hand.

Chapter Ten: Isabella

The sea air still clung to my skin long after I left the Moretti terrace.

I didn't speak. Didn't think. I walked. One street after another, heels echoing against ancient stones, past old churches and narrow alleys that remembered blood more than prayers.

Alessandro Moretti had looked me in the eye and told me he didn't believe a word I said.

And somehow… that terrified me less than the way he'd looked at me.

Like he already knew me.

Like he saw past the name, the dress, and the games-

And was still interested.

That was the part I hadn't planned for.

By the time I reached my apartment, my pulse had returned to normal. Or at least, enough to fake calm. I locked the door behind me, peeled off the heels, and headed straight for the shower.

The water burned, but I needed it.

Needed something real.

My reflection in the mirror afterward startled me. Not because I looked different-

But because I didn't.

Same painted lips. Same perfect liner. Same precise expression.

But the eyes?

They were betraying me.

They looked haunted.

The second phone rang at 10:13 p.m. sharp.

I didn't answer right away.

I made Russo wait.

Then, finally, I picked up.

"How did it go?" he asked.

His voice was smooth, but I heard it-just beneath the words-the edge of control. Russo didn't like when things drifted from his script.

"He's suspicious," I said. "Thinks I'm playing a game."

"Aren't you?"

That made me pause.

"Yes," I said slowly. "But he's not playing back the way we expected."

"Doesn't matter," he replied quickly. "We don't need him to trust you. We need him to want you. That's when he becomes weak."

Want me?

He already did. I knew it.

And I hated how part of me wanted to want him back.

"Stick to the plan," Russo continued. "Get close. Find where he keeps the shipment routes. His schedule. His off-record meetings."

"I know the mission," I said tightly.

"Then act like it."

And with that, he hung up.

I stared at the phone in my hand and felt something cold wrap around my spine.

I hated how his voice made me feel. Like I owed him.

Like I was a tool, not a person.

But Russo hadn't found me broken.

He'd made me that way. He gave me a purpose when I had none. A goal. A target.

And for years, that was enough.

But now... now I wasn't so sure.

I lay in bed with the lights off and the window cracked just enough to hear the distant traffic. I replayed the moment from earlier in my mind, over and over:

I don't believe anything you've told me, Alessandro had whispered.

I wouldn't, either, I had said.

And yet he hadn't stopped me. Hadn't exposed me. Hadn't tried to own me as Russo did.

Instead, he'd watched me leave with a look that said "I'll let you go-for now."

And something in me wanted to go back.

Not because of the plan.

But because for the first time in years, I didn't feel like a ghost when someone looked at me.

I felt... seen. That was dangerous. Because the more he saw me,

The harder it would be to remember who I was. Or what I came here to do.

Chapter Eleven: Alessandro

Trust was a myth in my world.

A story we told children before teaching them how to lie.

I sat in my office, lights dimmed, staring at the only thing that mattered right now - a photograph.

Black-and-white.

Grainy.

But unmistakable.

She was in it.

Not "Elena Rossi."

Not the flawless woman who graced my terrace with wine and venom.

But her.

Hair shorter. No makeup. Eyes wide with grief - or rage. Maybe both.

Beside her stood a man I recognized far too well.

Marco Russo.

That changed everything.

I didn't move. Didn't blink. Just let the implications bleed through the silence.

Russo was old Cosa Nostra. Outcast. Dangerous. Known for building ghosts out of orphans and sending them back as weapons. Everyone thought he'd vanished five years ago. But I always knew he was waiting.

And now he'd sent her.

Or she'd come on her own.

Either way, she wasn't a stranger anymore.

She was a ticking bomb in heels.

Luca entered quietly. The only one of my brothers I trusted with things like this.

"She doesn't exist," he said, dropping a file on my desk.

"Obviously."

"Fake name, fake address, fake documents. Whoever built her background knew what they were doing. Clean."

"How clean?"

He looked at me grimly. "Too clean."

That meant government level. Or better. Russo-level.

"She's connected to him," I said, gesturing to the photo.

Luca narrowed his eyes. "Then why haven't we buried her already?"

Because I wasn't ready.

Because part of me still wanted to believe that maybe - just maybe - she wasn't here to kill me.

Or worse... maybe I didn't care if she was.

After Luca left, I poured a drink. Neat. No ice. No comfort.

I thought about the way she looked at me. Not with fear. Not with seduction.

But with fire. Controlled. Contained.

But fire nonetheless.

She was playing me.

I knew it.

But I couldn't stop watching her play.

That was the problem.

People like me didn't fall. We chose.

And I had chosen... to keep her close.

Too close.

Midnight. I stepped out onto the balcony, overlooking the estate. The moonlight carved long shadows over the olive trees. The silence out here wasn't peaceful. It was tense. Waiting.

She was out there, somewhere in the city, probably reporting back to the same man who once tried to get my family from the inside.

And yet- If she walked through my door tonight, I wouldn't shoot her.

I'd pour her a drink.

And ask her why she hesitated before lying to me.

Because she had hesitated. I saw it.

A crack in the surface.

Maybe that's what I needed to find.

The crack.

The place she bled was real.

I'd seen killers. Raised them. Led them. Buried them.

But Isabella - or whatever her real name was - she wasn't just a killer.

She was a test.

And I didn't know if I was going to pass or fail.

Only that I couldn't look away anymore.

Chapter Twelve: Isabella

By the time I reached the safe house, the night had sharpened into steel.

I didn’t knock. Just entered with the access code, the familiar scent of old dust and colder loyalties pressing against me like a second skin.

Russo was already waiting — of course, he was.

He always moved like a man who’d written the end of the story and was just watching everyone catch up.

"You're late," he said without looking up.

"I'm careful," I replied, tossing my coat over the chair. "That’s what you trained me for, isn’t it?"

His lips twitched at the edge — not quite a smile. More like a crack in the stone. He gestured to the chair across from him, but I stayed standing.

"I spoke to Moretti," I said.

He raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“He knows.”

A long pause. The kind that fills rooms with silence like cement.

“How much?”

“Not everything. But enough to know I’m not who I say I am.”

Russo stood slowly, walked toward the small bar, and poured himself a whiskey. No ice. Men like him didn’t water down anything — not pain, not plans.

"And yet," he said finally, "he let you walk away."

I met his gaze. "I told you he’s not predictable."

“No,” Russo said. “You told me he was dangerous. That’s why I sent you.”

He turned then, and the air shifted.

“Tell me, Isa,” he said, stepping closer. “Are you still mine?”

That word.

Mine.

It used to feel like protection. Now it felt like a collar.

“I’m on a mission,” I replied, voice flat.

“That wasn’t an answer.”

“I haven’t failed you.”

“But you're hesitating.”

I said nothing.

Because anything I said would be a lie.

The silence between us tightened like wire.

Russo studied me for a moment longer, then walked over to the table and slid a folder across the surface.

"Inside is everything we need. Access points. Shipping lanes. His brother’s security pattern. It’s time to move."

I stared at the folder but didn’t touch it.

“He hasn’t shown me any of this yet.”

“Then make him.”

“He’s more careful than we thought.”

Russo’s voice dropped into something colder.

“Then get careless. Sleep with him if you have to. Drug him. Steal his phone. I don’t care how you do it I want that data within seventy-two hours. Or I burn the whole operation.”

I blinked. “You’d kill the op?”

“I’d kill him.”

Silence.

“You’re not ready for that,” I said quietly.

His eyes darkened. “You’re not ready for that. And that’s what concerns me.”

The air went still.

He stepped closer. Too close. His hand brushed my jaw, but there was no affection in it. Just control.

“I found you in ashes, Isa. Don’t forget who taught you to rise from them.”

I turned my head slowly away, and he dropped his hand.

“Seventy-two hours,” he repeated.

When I got back to my apartment, I didn’t cry.

Not because I wasn’t breaking.

But because I didn’t know if I had the right to anymore.

I stood under the shower again. Steam filled the bathroom like smoke from a fire I hadn’t put out yet. I leaned against the tile and let the heat scald the back of my neck until my skin stung red.

Three days.

That’s what he gave me.

Three days to destroy the one man who made me feel like I wasn’t a weapon.

Three days to become the thing he made me — one last time.

I looked at my reflection again.

Same eyes.

Same mask.

But something inside me was cracking.

Alessandro Moretti was the enemy.

He was power.

Corruption.

Everything I swore I’d take down.

And yet…

He looked at me like I wasn’t disposable.

Like he was trying to find the girl buried beneath the lies.

Do not use her.

Not on her.

Save her.

And that scared me more than Russo ever could.

Tomorrow, I will return to Moretti.

Pretend.

Smile.

Lie.

But tonight…

Tonight I curled into myself in a silent apartment with nothing but my conscience for company, and for the first time in years, I whispered three forbidden words into the dark.

“I don’t know."

Chapter Thirteen: Alessandro

Trust is a loaded gun.

And today, I planned to hand it to her—grip first.

I didn’t sleep much the night before. My mind kept circling like vultures over too many truths left half-buried. But when dawn broke over the estate, I had already made up my mind.

If she was going to betray me, I wanted her to do it while I was watching.

At 8:07 a.m., I stood outside her door.

No guards. No gun. Just me. That, in itself, was a message.

She opened it a moment later, still in a robe, eyes half-shadowed with sleep—or something she couldn’t name.

“You’re early,” she said.

“You’re late,” I replied. “Get dressed. We’re leaving in fifteen.”

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”

She didn’t argue. But I saw the flicker in her expression—the calculation. She hated not knowing. That made two of us=

We drove out of the city in my black Maserati, her silence heavier than most people's screams.

She didn’t ask where we were going. She didn’t need to. She was watching my hands, my eyes, and every muscle in my jaw. Studying me.

Good.

I wanted her to.

I drove for over an hour, deep into the hills outside Palermo, until the road twisted into something more private. Trees closed around us, olive groves turned to stone, and eventually we reached it:

The vineyard.

Her brow furrowed. “You own this?”

I nodded. “Inherited. My mother’s family. It’s been in ruins since I was seventeen.”

“Why bring me here?”

Because no one knew I ever came here.

Because if she was reporting back to Russo, this would be a new entry in her file.

Because this place was real.

And I wanted to see what she did with real.

The silence stretched as we walked through overgrown paths, vines twisted around crumbling posts, and soil dry and cracked under our feet.

“I thought you only dealt in blood and drugs,” she said finally.

“I deal in power,” I answered. “And sometimes power tastes like good wine.”

That made her almost smile.

“Why show me this?” she asked again.

I looked at her then—looked. The wind played with her hair. The robe had been replaced by jeans and a fitted black blouse. She was beautiful in a way that didn’t try. But it was the eyes I watched.

Not the mouth.

Not the hands.

The eyes.

So I told her.

“Because this is the one place in the world no one watches me. No cameras. No brothers. No guards. Just the ghost of a family that died too soon and a promise I never kept.”

“And you’re showing it to me.”

“I want to see if you’ll burn it down.”

She froze for half a second.

That’s all I needed.

“Alessandro”

“Don’t lie,” I cut her off gently. “Not here. This place deserves better.”

She looked away.

“Then don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to,” she said softly.

Later, we sat under the old stone pergola, where the sun bled through rusting vines and the scent of rosemary still clung to the broken walls.

I opened a bottle from the cellar—1995. Dusty. Rare. Priceless. Like memory.

“You know,” I said, pouring into two glasses, “the thing about betrayal is—it never comes from enemies.”

She didn’t touch her glass.

“And what about forgiveness?” she asked.

“That comes later. If you’re lucky. Or dead.”

We drank in silence after that. Or at least I did. She held her glass like it might explode.

The drive back was quiet but charged.

Like something had shifted.

She didn’t know that the car was being tracked.

She didn’t know that Luca had eyes on us from the ridge.

But she knew I wasn’t playing the same game anymore.

And maybe… neither was she.

That night, I stood on the balcony of my bedroom, watching Palermo flicker with its usual sin and gold. My phone buzzed.

A message from Luca:

Still nothing. She didn’t signal. No contact.

I turned the screen off.

And stared into the dark.

If she was a spy… she was a good one.

But if she wasn’t?

Then I was the one in danger.

Because I was starting to hope.

And that was always the first mistake.

Chapter Fourteen: Isabella

There are moments when the mission blurs.

When the lines between right and wrong dissolve into gray.

And standing in the middle of Alessandro Moretti’s broken vineyard, I saw gray for the first time.

It was supposed to be just another location to report.

A potential weak spot.

An opening.

Instead, it felt like a confession.

And it terrified me more than any gun ever could.

I didn’t sleep that night. Not really. I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, playing every second of the day on a loop.

He took me somewhere sacred.

He poured me wine that cost more than my old apartment.

And he looked at me like I was real.

Worse, I wanted to be.

I hadn’t wanted to be anything in years.

But now? Something was building. Quiet. Dangerous.

And it had nothing to do with revenge.

At 3:00 a.m., I turned on my burner phone.

No messages.

No missed calls.

But I knew Russo would be watching.

I hesitated before typing.

> No movement today. He’s keeping locations close.

No confirmed access to systems yet. Will update.

I hovered over the SEND button for thirty-two seconds.

Then I powered off the phone.

Didn’t send it.

And that, more than anything, terrified me.

The next morning, I found Alessandro in the training room.

Shirtless. Sweating. Focused.

Punch after punch into a worn-out leather bag. Like he was trying to beat something out of himself.

He didn’t see me right away, and I stood there silently, watching.

He wasn’t like the men I was trained to manipulate.

He didn’t just lead. He carried things.

Like the vineyard.

Like his brothers.

Like ghosts, I hadn’t seen yet but felt in the air around him.

When he finally turned, his eyes met mine—and the world seemed to narrow to that moment.

“You’re early,” he said.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

He nodded, wiped the sweat from his brow, and offered me a water bottle without a word. The gesture wasn’t grand. Wasn’t seductive.

It was... normal.

And that somehow cut deeper.

Later that afternoon, I left the estate under the pretense of shopping. Alessandro didn’t question it. Maybe that was the test. Maybe he wanted to see if I’d run.

But I didn’t.

Instead, I walked the familiar alley on the south side of the city and entered through the back of an abandoned tailor’s shop.

He was already there. Waiting.

Russo.

Still in that same gray coat. Still with that expression he already knew every betrayal before it happened.

"You’re late," he said.

"Don't start," I snapped. "You want information? I’m doing the job."

He stared. Silent. Then walked over and handed me a new device.

Smaller than the last. Cleaner. Meaner.

“I want you to plant this on his office line,” he said. “Tomorrow.”

“Too risky.”

“Do it anyway.”

“I need time”

“You don’t have time, Isa.” His voice cracked like thunder. “You think I don’t see it? Do you think I don’t feel it on you? The hesitation? The softness?”

I turned away, jaw clenched.

“Do you even remember why we’re doing this?” he hissed. “What they did do to your brother? Or have you fallen for the enemy so easily?”

My spine stiffened.

“I remember everything,” I whispered. “Don’t you dare question that?”

“Then prove it,” he growled. “Because if I sense for one second that your loyalty is slipping, I won’t just burn the op”

His voice dropped.

“I’ll take care of you myself.”

I left with the device burning a hole in my pocket.

My hands were shaking by the time I reached my apartment. I dropped the bag on the kitchen counter and stared at it like it might explode.

Because in a way—it already had.

Alessandro had shown me the only place he was vulnerable.

And now I had to decide:

Use it

Or protect it.

That night, I stood at my window, looking over the lights of Palermo, and whispered something I never thought I would:

“Please… don’t make me choose.”

But I already knew the truth.

The choice had been made the moment I didn’t send that message.

And soon, someone was going to pay for it.

Chapter Fifteen: Alessandro

Something was off.

It started with the way she smiled. Not the way her lips curved, but the fraction of a second too long before she did.

Too practiced.

Too late.

Too deliberate.

I noticed it when she returned from the city

Her coat was buttoned wrong — left over right — which she never did. She wasn't wearing the earrings she left that morning. And when she kissed me on the cheek like she had nothing to hide…

She blinked three times in under two seconds.

I'd trained men to spot lies with less.

And suddenly, every nerve in my body screamed:

Watch her.

I didn't say anything. Not yet.

Instead, I played the part. I let her believe I was still lulled by soft glances and the silence we'd started to share like secrets.

But that night, I checked the security footage.

Every camera. Every timestamp.

She had left through the east gate.

Which was fine.

Until I saw the signal jamming.

Fifteen minutes missing from the feed.

Deliberate.

Calculated.

Too clean.

At 1:14 a.m., I sat in my office, the glass of whiskey untouched in front of me.

It wasn't rage I felt. Not yet. It was something older. Something colder.

Survival.

I'd trusted her just enough to see if she'd bite.

And she had.

But then… why didn't I feel triumphant?

Why did part of me still want it to be anything else?

I didn't sleep. Instead, I did something I hadn't done in years.

I followed someone.

I waited until morning when she went for her usual walk around the estate — the one where she pretended not to notice I had eyes on her from the towers.

Only this time, I pulled the guards back.

Let her believe she was alone.

And she took the bait.

She stopped by the garden wall. Slipped a hand into the pocket of her coat. Pulled out something small, square.

Black.

A device.

I couldn't see it clearly from my vantage point — but I knew what it was.

A tracker. A recorder. A bug.

She didn’t plant it.

She stared at it for a long time.

Then…

She put it back in her pocket.

And turned around.

Eyes red.

Like she'd been crying.

When she came inside, I was waiting in the lounge.

I made it look casual. One hand on the armrest. A half-read book in the other. She paused when she saw me.

“You’re up early,” she said, voice steady.

“I never sleep much,” I replied.

“Too much on your mind?”

“Always.”

She smiled — barely.

And walked past me.

But I saw it. The tension in her shoulders. The hitch in her breath.

She knew I knew something.

And now, the game had shifted.

Later that evening, I walked into the room she’d been using as a study. I did it silently. She didn’t hear me come in.

She was sitting at the desk. The bug on the table in front of her.

Still unplanted.

Her back was to me.

She whispered something.

I almost missed it.

But I caught the words.

“God, what am I doing?”

I stepped back into the hallway before she saw me.

Closed the door quietly.

And for the first time in years, I didn’t know what move to make next.

Because if she was the enemy…

She was the most reluctant one I’d ever seen.

And if she wasn’t?

Then she was a prisoner of something worse than orders.

Her own heart.

But I couldn’t afford to guess anymore.

Tomorrow, I’d push.

I’d make her choose.

And no matter what she picked… something would break.

Her trust.

Or mine. Or both.

Chapter Sixteen: Isabella

The walls were closing in.

But they weren’t made of stone.

They were made of silence. Of unsaid things. Of eyes watching me from behind a mask that used to feel like safety.

And worst of all?

I wasn’t sure who I was hiding from anymore—Alessandro… or myself.

The bug still sat on the table.

Untouched.

Inactivated.

Unplaced.

Like a ticking bomb, I refused to detonate.

Every time I looked at it, I saw two things:

My brother’s face.

And Alessandro’s vineyard.

One haunted me.

The other…

I didn’t know what it did anymore. It unraveled me.

I felt it the moment Alessandro began watching me more closely. He didn't ask questions. Didn't need to.

He was too smart for direct accusations.

He let the quiet do the talking.

That was the most terrifying thing about him.

He didn’t need to say a word to make me feel completely exposed.

At breakfast, he barely touched his food. Just watched me over the rim of his coffee cup, eyes unreadable.

He asked nothing about the day before.

Nothing about my trip.

Which only made the silence scream louder.

I excused myself early.

My hands were trembling.

I went outside to breathe.

To remind myself that I had a reason. That everything I’d done, every lie I’d told, had been for something.

Justice. Vengeance. Closure.

But even those words were starting to lose shape inside me.

I stood by the same garden wall I always went to when I needed to disappear for a moment. The stone was warm under my palms.

And I pulled out the bug again.

So small. So deadly.

Just place it, Isabella. Just do it.

But I couldn’t.

Because planting it now would mean something else.

It would mean betraying him.

Not the mafia. Not the family.

Him.

And suddenly, that wasn’t a strategic line.

It was a moral one.

And I couldn’t cross it.

I didn’t notice him behind me at first.

But I heard his voice—quiet. Calm. Terrifying.

“You never plant it.”

I froze.

Turned slowly.

He was leaning against the archway. Not armed. Not angry. Just… present.

Like a storm waiting to choose whether to rain or strike.

I said nothing.

Neither did him.

Then he walked toward me.

Slow. Unhurried.

He stopped a few feet away.

“What does he have on you?” he asked, voice like gravel and velvet.

I blinked. “Who?”

“Don’t insult either of us.”

A beat passed.

Then another.

I took a breath.

And for the first time, let part of the truth fall from my lips.

“Not what he has on me. What he took from me.”

His jaw clenched. But he didn’t interrupt.

“My brother,” I said. “His name was Matteo. Nineteen. Wrong place, wrong time. He got in the way of one of your family’s shipments.

He went still. “When?”

“Three years ago. Catania. He was just a courier. Delivering food to a warehouse next door.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t,” I snapped. “That’s the point, isn’t it? To you, it was a Tuesday. To me, it was the day my world cracked open.”

He said nothing.

Because there was nothing to say.

The silence stretched until it felt like the only thing keeping me standing.

Then he stepped forward. Not threateningly. Not gently either.

Just real.

“Is that why you came here? To destroy us from the inside?”

“No,” I said, voice raw. “I came to destroy you. Specifically.”

“And now?”

I swallowed.

He was too close.

And I was too tired to lie.

“Now I don’t know what I’m doing anymore.”

I expected anger. Or betrayal. Or even a cold retreat.

What I didn’t expect was for him to reach into his pocket and pull out the bug.

The one from this morning.

“I followed you,” he said. “I saw you hold it. Saw you choose not to use it.”

My breath caught.

He placed it gently in my hand. Closed my fingers around it.

“You still can,” he whispered. “You still have the choice.”

“Why are you giving me this?” I asked.

“Because I need to know if the person standing in front of me… is still here for war. Or something else.”

Tears stung the corners of my eyes.

Not because I was weak.

But because this was the most dangerous thing anyone had ever done to me.

Trusted me.

He walked away after that.

Didn’t look back.

And I stood there, bug in hand, war in heart.

Because now… I wasn’t just choosing sides.

I was choosing who I was going to become.

And there was no going back.

Chapter Seventeen: Alessandro

Trust was never given in our world. It was carved. Cut. Beaten into shape through fire and consequence.

So what I was about to do — bringing her to them — wasn’t mercy.

It was trial by fire.

And if she burned?

I’d know she wasn’t meant to survive in our world.

The sun had barely risen when I stepped into the room where my brothers were gathered.

Dante was sharpening a knife.

Matteo, as always, leaned against the wall with that signature smirk, unreadable and arrogant.

Luca sat at the table, flipping through surveillance reports with his usual cold precision.

Nico stood silently by the window, drinking coffee like it was blood.

Enzo, the youngest, typed rapidly on a tablet, hacking into systems most people didn’t even know existed.

Six brothers.

Six sides of a legacy soaked in blood and bound by silence.

And for the first time in our lives, I was about to bring someone in.

“You’re sure?” Luca asked, without looking up.

“No,” I said. “But I need to know what she’ll do when the curtain’s pulled back.”

“And if she runs?” Dante asked, pausing the rhythmic scrape of steel.

“Then she runs,” I said.

“And if she stays?” Nico murmured.

“Then that’s even more dangerous.”

They didn’t protest further.

They didn’t need to.

My word, as the oldest, was final — even if it wasn’t always right.

At noon, I told her we were going for a drive.

She didn’t ask questions. Didn’t pack anything. Just followed.

Like she always did.

And that, more than anything, made me nervous.

People who followed too easily either trusted you…

Or had already decided how to kill you.

The road twisted through hills and vineyards. Far from the estate.

Far from the illusion of calm, we pretended to live in.

We reached the villa by early afternoon.

A compound fortified like a military base but disguised as a crumbling relic of Italian nobility.

Two guards let us in without a word. She glanced at them, then at the Iron Gate as it sealed behind her.

Her silence said everything.

She knew this wasn’t just a visit.

This was a test.

Inside, the air smelled of leather, espresso, and secrets.

The five of them were waiting in the great room, each a variation of me — some colder, some louder, none safer.

I motioned her forward.

“This is Isabella,” I said simply. “She’s staying with me.”

It wasn’t a declaration.

It was a warning.

To her.

To them.

To myself.

Dante stepped forward first. Big. Brutal. Eyes that had seen too much war and not enough peace.

“You got to fight in you?” he asked her directly.

She didn’t blink. “Enough to walk into a room full of killers.”

He grinned.

“I like her,” he said.

Matteo was next. Calculated. Quiet. The one you never saw coming until your neck was broken.

He didn’t speak.

Just studied her.

Then offered a single nod.

That was more than most people ever got.

Luca ignored her entirely, except to say, “If she compromises you, I’ll end her.”

“No,” I said. “You’ll answer to me.”

That silence after?

That was the sound of shifting power.

Enzo gave her a small smile.

“If he trusts you, I’ll trust you,” he said.

Then added, “But I’ll be watching your texts. Don’t take it personally.”

She almost smiled at that.

Nico was last. And he was the one I worried about.

Because he didn’t trust anyone.

“Why now?” he asked me. “Why her?”

“She’s earned her place.”

“Have you earned the risk?”

I looked at Isabella.

Then back at him.

“I’m done letting fear decide who gets close.”

The moment passed.

And she stayed.

She didn’t flinch.

Didn’t try to escape.

Didn’t ask to leave.

Instead, she walked deeper into the lion’s den — like she’d been there before.

Later, as I led her to the private wing, she finally spoke.

“Your family… it’s not what I expected.”

“No,” I said. “It’s worse.”

She looked at me then, really looked.

And what I saw in her eyes wasn’t fear.

It was something more dangerous.

Understanding.

When we reached her room, I paused by the door.

“You don’t have to prove anything to me, Isabella,” I said.

“I know,” she whispered. “But I’m going to anyway.”

And just like that — she made her choice.

But I wasn’t sure yet whether it was the one that would save her…

Or get her killed.

Chapter Eighteen: Isabella

No one told me what it would feel like to walk into the lion's den… and be invited to stay.

There were no chains.

No threats.

No locks.

But make no mistake—this was still a prison.

Only here, the bars were made of names, oaths, and blood.

And I had just been handed the key.

To either use…

Or destroy.

The room they gave me was far too elegant for someone meant to be watched.

Velvet curtains. Warm oak floors. A terrace overlooking the vineyards. It screamed comfort, but I knew better. Comfort was a mask here. Everything was.

Still, I sat on the edge of the bed and breathed in the silence.

It wasn’t peaceful.

It was tense.

Like the house itself was holding its breath.

I could still feel Alessandro’s presence lingering in the hallway. His words.

“You don’t have to prove anything to me.”

But he was wrong.

I had everything to prove.

To him.

To myself.

To the boy, I buried in a plain white coffin three years ago.

I didn’t sleep that night.

I walked the halls instead, barefoot and silent, letting the house wrap around me like a shadow. From down the hall, I heard murmurs—low voices, laughter, and music. The brothers.

I didn’t want to eavesdrop.

But I didn’t stop myself either.

I paused outside the study door, just slightly ajar.

Dante’s voice rumbled first. “She’s got backbone. I’ll give her that.”

“She’s dangerous,” Nico said. “Too poised. Too quiet.”

“Exactly why she might be useful,” Luca added.

“She’s not a soldier,” Matteo finally said, and for the first time, his voice didn’t sound like ice—it sounded… cautious.

“She’s not supposed to be,” Alessandro said. “She’s mine.”

There was a silence so thick, I thought they’d heard my heartbeat.

Then a single sentence fell into the air.

So quiet.

So damning.

“Then you’d better hope she’s not here to burn you from the inside out.”

I stepped away before they saw me.

Back to my room.

Back to the reality I was now trapped in.

But something inside me had shifted.

They were wrong.

I hadn’t come here to burn Alessandro.

I’d come to destroy his world.

But somewhere along the way… he’d made me question which world was worth saving.

The next morning, I joined them for breakfast. All of them.

Alessandro was already seated at the head of the long table, drinking espresso like it was a weapon.

Luca didn’t look at me.

Matteo did. Enzo smiled.

Dante offered toast like he was offering a peace treaty.

Nico didn’t even pretend to like my presence.

“Sleep well?” Alessandro asked, eyes unreadable.

I nodded. “Your floorboards are loud.”

Dante snorted. “Did she just insult our home?”

“Only a little,” I said, taking my seat.

Luca muttered, “She’s got teeth.”

“Careful,” I replied. “I bite.”

The silence that followed wasn’t hostile.

It was… curious.

Like they were starting to wonder what exactly Alessandro had brought into their nest.

And whether it was a weapon.

Or a curse.

After breakfast, Enzo cornered me in the hallway.

“Do you like puzzles?” he asked.

I blinked. “What kind?”

“The dangerous kind.”

He handed me a phone. Locked. Encrypted. Untraceable.

“I found this in Palermo last month. Belonged to a man who vanished two weeks later.”

“And you want me to unlock it?”

“I want to see what you do with it.”

Challenge accepted.

For the next two hours, I sat alone with that phone. No bug. No spy gear. Just my brain.

And for the first time since I stepped into this world, I felt something dangerous bubbling beneath my skin.

Excitement.

Not because I was proving myself to them.

But because I remembered this version of me.

Sharp. Ruthless. Focused.

Before grief rewired my soul.

Before Alessandro rewired my heart.

I cracked the first layer in ninety minutes.

The second ten minutes later.

The third? That one scared me.

Because it didn’t contain bank accounts. Or weapons shipments.

It contained names.

Dozens of them. Some highlighted. Some with dates next to them.

And one circled in red.

Matteo Russo.

My brother.

My blood ran cold.

This wasn’t just a coincidence.

It was a connection.

A direct line from them… to him.

But before I could process more, Alessandro’s voice came from behind me.

“Find something interesting?”

I turned slowly, the phone still in hand. “You tell me.”

He didn’t look at the screen.

He looked at me.

And that was far more terrifying.

Because he was searching for something deeper.

A flicker of truth. A crack in my control. A confirmation that I was still the woman he invited into his world…

Not the ghost who’d come to tear it apart.

I wanted to lie.

I wanted to say I found nothing.

But instead, I said:

“I found something that might matter to both of us.”

And for the first time… I saw fear flash in his eyes.

Not for himself.

But for me.

Because he knew—whatever came next—would cost us more than blood.

It would cost us everything.

Chapter Nineteen: Alessandro

Trust is fragile.

But secrets?

Secrets are explosive.

And the moment I saw that damn phone in her hand, I knew we were holding a bomb with a lit fuse.

She didn’t flinch.

Didn’t pretend.

Didn’t offer soft lies or sidestep the truth.

“I found something that might matter to both of us.”

It was her voice—calm, too calm—that made the hairs on my neck stand.

She turned the screen toward me slowly, like she was revealing a weapon. But it wasn’t the phone that unsettled me. It was the name displayed in bold white text over black:

Matteo Russo.

Not my brother.

Not her.

But someone else we both once knew.

Someone I had buried under the ruins of Sicily five years ago.

Or so I thought.

I took the phone from her and studied the metadata.

The last login—was three days ago.

Location ping—Messina.

Most recent activity—an outgoing file dump titled “Inheritance.”

What the hell did that mean?

My jaw clenched.

“How did you get this open?”

She leaned against the desk behind her, arms crossed. “I used what I remembered. Codes. Patterns. Tricks from before.”

Before.

Before me.

Before now.

And that meant one thing:

She had already been looking for answers before she ever stepped into my arms.

I was never her beginning.

Just the next breadcrumb on a longer trail.

“I thought Matteo Russo was dead,” she said softly.

“So did me,” I replied. “But that name… that red circle? That’s a kill order. Not a eulogy.”

She stiffened.

“Someone marked him?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “We did.”

Her eyes locked on mine.

And for the first time, she didn’t look angry. Or betrayed.

She looked hunted.

I motioned for her to follow me.

Not back to her room.

Not to my brothers.

But to the archives.

A place even most of my bloodline had forgotten existed.

Through the cellar. Behind the wine racks. Past the reinforced concrete door with no handle.

I placed my palm against the biometric panel and waited.

The door groaned open with a whisper of air and a sigh of time.

Inside, paper met shadow.

Old files. Surveillance logs. Death orders, sealed in wax and written in code.

I pulled a box from the third shelf, marked with three crimson lines. The mark of legacy.

I opened it in silence.

And there it was.

A file dated November 3rd, 2020.

Target: Matteo Russo.

Status: Confirmed kill.

Agent: C. Falcone.

Reason: Treason. Infiltration. Leaked identities to rival families.

Isabella’s fingers trembled as she traced the bottom edge of the file.

“This can’t be real,” she whispered.

“It is,” I said. “But what’s more important—why it’s showing up now.”

Because this wasn’t just an old ghost.

It was a message.

Someone wanted her to see it.

Someone knew exactly what she was to him—before me.

And exactly what that connection would cost.

“Do you trust me?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

She didn’t give one.

She didn’t need to.

She just looked at me, eyes blazing, and said:

“If they’re trying to play me, they picked the wrong girl.”

Later that night, I met with Luca and Nico behind closed doors. No wine. No smiles. Just facts.

“The phone leads to Messina,” I told them. “And the message isn’t random.”

Luca raised a brow. “You think he’s alive?”

“I think someone wants us to believe he is.”

Nico lit a cigarette, exhaling slowly. “And if it’s bait?”

“Then we bite,” I said. “But not the way they expect.”

Luca folded his arms. “She’s in the middle of this now, Ale. You sure she’s not being used?”

“No,” I said. “But she’s not the only one under a microscope anymore.”

Nico’s voice darkened. “Then we dig.”

When I returned to her room, she was on the terrace, barefoot, staring out into the dark as she could see through it.

I joined her silently, letting the night settle around us.

After a while, she spoke.

Voice low.

Uncertain.

“Do you ever think we met for the wrong reason?”

I turned toward her.

“No,” I said. “But I do think we’re about to find out what we’re made of.”

Because if Matteo Russo was alive…

He wasn’t coming back for peace.

He was coming for revenge.

And Isabella?

She might just be the fuse he lit to blow it all apart.

Chapter Twenty: Isabella

Some women are born to be muses.

Some queens.

But a few of us are made for war.

And I?

I was born from ashes and sculpted by betrayal.

So when I stood on that terrace, wind brushing through my hair like whispered warnings, I didn’t pray for peace.

I prepared for the storm.

The phone was a trigger.

The file was the bullet.

But the real weapon? Me.

I couldn’t sleep. Not after what I saw. Not after realizing that the past I’d tried to bury had claws—and it was climbing out of its grave.

Matteo Russo.

Alive? Framed? Hunted?

None of it made sense.

He was the first person who ever taught me how to read between the lines.

The first person who warned me about the Falcons.

And now, the Falcons were the ones showing me his name… circled in red like a target.

It felt too convenient.

Like someone was folding my world back in on itself.

One calculated move at a time.

At dawn, I found myself walking through the vineyard, the fog still thick over the rows of vines. The earth beneath my feet was soft, and the silence was oddly soothing. For the first time in days, I felt… alone. And I needed that.

Until I wasn’t.

“You walk like someone being followed,” a voice said.

I turned.

Luca Falcone.

Tall. Broad-shouldered. As unreadable as his brother, but colder somehow. Less forgiving.

I didn’t respond.

He lit a cigarette and took a long drag before tossing the lighter to me.

I caught it.

“What do you want, Luca?” I asked, slipping it into my pocket without lighting anything.

“To understand you,” he said. “You don’t scream. You don’t cry. You walk into a house full of killers and act like its Sunday brunch.”

“Would you prefer I screamed?”

He smirked. “No. But I’d prefer to know if I should be worried.”

I tilted my head. “About me?”

“About my brother.”

His words hung in the air.

I walked past him, slow and deliberate, then paused at his side.

“If you think I’m here to ruin Alessandro,” I said softly, “then you haven’t been paying attention.”

“And if you’re here to ruin us all?” he asked.

I smiled. “Then you should’ve killed me yesterday.”

That night, Alessandro wasn’t at dinner.

Neither were Enzo or Dante.

Luca sat at the head of the table, studying me with a surgeon’s precision.

I didn’t flinch. I poured wine instead.

“Where’s your brother?” I asked casually.

“Business,” Luca replied.

“With whom?”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“Only the ones that keep me alive.”

After dinner, I returned to my room—but it wasn’t long before a knock sounded.

Matteo.

Not mine. His Matteo. Alessandro’s brother.

The quiet one. The fixer. The ghost.

He slipped inside like smoke and shut the door without a sound.

“Alessandro told me to keep an eye on you,” he said.

I raised an eyebrow. “So now I’m a prisoner again?”

“No,” he said. “You’re the guest who might start a fire.”

There was something different in his eyes. A flicker of curiosity. Maybe even… respect.

“I’m not here to hurt your family,” I said quietly. “But I am here to finish something that was started years ago.”

“And you think Matteo Russo is the missing piece?”

I didn’t answer.

I didn’t need to.

He nodded once. “Then let’s find him.”

I blinked. “You’re helping me?”

“I’m helping Alessandro,” he said. “Which means keeping you alive long enough to do what you came to do… without tearing this house apart in the process.”

He handed me a flash drive.

“What’s on it?” I asked.

“Names,” he said. “From the same list you saw. But with one difference—these are people who died after your brother did. And every one of them had ties to Russo.”

I stared at the drive like it might burn me.

“Careful, Isabella,” Matteo said as he opened the door to leave. “The deeper you dig, the more likely you are to end up in the same grave.”

That night, I didn’t sleep again.

Instead, I stared at the ceiling, wondering…

If trust was ever real.

If revenge ever ends.

And if Alessandro Falcone would still hold my hand once he learned just how many sins I was willing to commit in the name of truth.

Because if I was going to survive this

I’d have to become something far worse than what they already thought I was.

I’d have to become one of them.

Chapter Twenty-One: Alessandro

Some truths are born silent.

Others scream through the silence, even when no one speaks.

That night, the silence in the vineyard wasn’t peace.

It was a warning.

And I’d learned long ago—warnings never come alone.

Matteo had been quiet all evening. When he finally returned from Isabella’s wing of the villa, he dropped a small flash drive on my desk and leaned against the doorframe.

“She’s not just chasing ghosts,” he said. “She’s chasing a pattern.”

I picked up the drive but didn’t plug it in. Not yet.

“What did you tell her?”

“That she’d better be ready to finish what she started. With or without you.”

I nodded slowly. “And what do you think?”

“I think she already has started,” he said. “And we’re either going to help her or get caught in the crossfire.”

After he left, I sat there a long time, staring at the drive.

Messina. Russo. The old wounds reopened like time hadn’t passed at all.

But the ache in my chest wasn’t just about betrayal.

It was about her.

She was slipping through my fingers—and I could feel it.

Not because she was lying.

Not because she didn’t care.

But because her purpose was bigger than our connection.

And part of me… respected that.

The other part?

Hated it.

I finally opened the files after midnight.

Names. Dates. Places.

Victims, mostly.

Each had one thing in common: an anonymous account deposited a precise sum to each of their surviving relatives—exactly twenty-four hours after their deaths.

The same sum each time.

€17,000.

A number only those of us in the Falcone circle understood.

It was the cost of silence.

Blood money.

This wasn’t just a revenge list.

It was a message.

From someone on the inside.

Someone who wanted her to see.

The next morning, I met Luca in the training yard behind the villa. He was wrapping his fists, eyes narrowed like he’d been waiting for me.

“You know what I don’t like, Ale?” he asked, throwing a jab at the heavy bag. “Secrets in my own house.”

“She’s not the enemy.”

“She’s a question mark with good legs,” he growled. “And that makes her dangerous.”

I didn’t argue. Because he wasn’t wrong.

“She’s also our best shot at getting ahead of whoever’s orchestrating this.”

Luca stopped mid-swing. “You think someone’s trying to set her up?”

“I think someone’s trying to set us all up,” I replied.

His jaw ticked. “And Matteo Russo?”

“If he’s alive, he’s not working alone.”

Later that day, I found her in the old library. No guards. No tension. Just her and a stack of old books—maps, documents, records no one had touched in years.

She didn’t look up when I entered. “You were gone.”

“I had to think.”

“Dangerous hobby,” she muttered.

I almost smiled.

I walked to her side and placed the flash drive on the table.

“You were right. This wasn’t an accident. Someone’s curating what you’re meant to see.”

She looked at me then. Really looked.

“You believe me?”

“I always did,” I said.

And I meant it.

She blinked, caught off guard. Then her walls came back up—quietly, gently. Like someone used to being hurt.

“You don’t have to protect me, Alessandro.”

“I’m not,” I said. “I’m protecting us both.”

We stood there a moment. No lies. No games.

Just two people bound by truths they couldn’t outrun.

And maybe something else.

Maybe something beginning again.

But just as I reached for her hand, the front doors of the villa burst open.

Footsteps. Voices. Urgency.

Then Dante’s voice thundered through the hall.

“Alessandro! We’ve got a problem.”

I didn’t move. Neither did her.

We both knew…

The past wasn’t done with us yet.

And whatever storm had begun

We were standing dead in the center of it.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Isabella

It’s strange how quickly peace can turn into chaos.

How one heartbeat can separate silence from the sound of war knocking on your door.

When Dante called Alessandro out of the library, I didn't follow immediately.

I waited.

Listened.

Because that's what survivors do.

And I wasn't just surviving anymore.

I was hunting.

I finally stepped into the hallway and found them gathered in the foyer.

All six brothers. Tension coiled between them like a live wire.

Dante paced near the front doors, jaw clenched tight.

Enzo leaned against the wall with arms crossed, his expression unreadable.

Matteo was already typing something into his tablet, and Luca... Luca watched me.

Not like I was the cause.

Like I might be the key.

"What's going on?" I asked, voice steady.

Alessandro turned to me.

"Messina's in flames," he said.

I blinked. "What?"

"Warehouse," Matteo added. "One of ours. Torched. Symbol carved into the side wall."

He turned the tablet toward me.

My chest constricted.

A red serpent, devouring its own tail.

The mark of the Cerchio Nero.

A crime family that was supposed to be extinct.

"They're back?" I whispered.

"No," Luca said coldly. "They never left."

Cerchio Nero.

The Black Circle.

Once, long ago, I watched my father slit a man's throat for uttering that name.

He told me they were devils in suits. That even the Falcone’s tread carefully around them.

But if they'd targeted a Falcone warehouse-

If they were branding territory-

This wasn't just revenge.

This was declaration.

Later that night, I stood on the balcony outside my room, the wind colder than usual.

I could feel it coming.

Change.

War.

A shift in power that would shake everything.

I wasn't afraid.

I'd lived through worse.

But what scared me, truly, was how I was starting to feel about him.

Because Alessandro wasn't just becoming a protector.

He was becoming a choice.

A dangerous one.

One I couldn't afford to make if I wanted to finish what I started.

A soft knock pulled me from my thoughts.

It was Nico.

"Alessandro wants you in the briefing room."

I followed him down the hallway, heart pounding.

Inside, the table was covered in maps. Dots. Connections.

Old names I hadn't heard in years.

One file lay open in front of Alessandro, circled in red ink.

My name.

Right next to Matteo Russo.

Everyone in the room turned to look at me.

"I need to know," Alessandro said quietly. "What exactly was your connection to him?"

I hesitated.

Not because I didn't know the answer.

Because I did.

"He was my handler," I admitted. "Before I ever met any of you. Before the Falcones."

Luca swore under his breath.

"You worked for him?" Enzo asked.

I nodded. "Briefly. I thought he was helping me take down the families who killed my brother."

"You mean our family," Dante said darkly.

"No," I replied. "I mean the Cerchio Nero."

Silence

Matteo looked up from his tablet.

"If that's true," he said slowly, "then Russo wasn't a traitor."

"No," I said. "He was undercover. And I think he found something before he disappeared."

"Or was killed," Luca added.

I met Alessandro's eyes.

"Or framed," I said.

Whatever this was...

It went deeper than I thought.

And I had just drawn the first breath at the edge of a war no one was ready for.

Not even the Falcone’s.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Alessandro

A man doesn’t become a king by birthright.

He becomes one by blood spilled, trust earned—and enemies buried deep enough that even God forgets their names.

I never wanted a throne.

But I built one with every lie I chose to carry and every truth I chose to bury.

And now it was crumbling beneath me.

The moment she said Cerchio Nero, something in me shifted.

I remembered my father’s voice late one night, when I was sixteen, after I asked why the family never touched Messina’s eastern docks.

"Because the devil lives there, figlio mio," he said, pouring himself a drink. "And when the devil sleeps, you do not wake him."

The devil hadn’t just woken.

He was already here.

And somehow, Isabella was at the center of it all.

After the meeting, I stood in my office alone, staring at the old map of Sicily on the wall.

Six red pins marked Falcone territory.

Four black ones—old markers, mostly forgotten—showed the last known Cerchio Nero locations.

They overlapped now.

That was no accident.

“Can I come in?” her voice asked behind me.

I didn’t turn.

“You’re already inside.”

She stepped forward, slow but sure.

“You’re angry,” she said.

“No,” I replied. “Anger is easy. This is something worse.”

She was quiet.

I finally faced her.

“You should have told me about Russo from the beginning.”

“I didn’t know if I could trust you.”

“That’s the problem,” I said, voice harder than I meant. “You still don’t.”

She looked down, then back up.

“You think this is easy for me?” she asked. “I came here with nothing but ghosts and half a plan. I’ve watched the man who murdered my brother be protected by the same people who now protect me.”

“You think we killed your brother?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore!” she snapped. “But I do know the Cerchio Nero are playing a longer game, and we’re all just pieces.”

I stared at her, heart pounding.

“Then let’s stop being pieces,” I said. “Let’s become the ones moving the board.”

The next morning, the plan started to form.

Matteo found a contact—an arms broker in Catania—who once worked for the Cerchio Nero before they disappeared.

“He only talks in person,” Matteo said. “And only if he’s paid in information, not money.”

“What kind of information?” Dante asked.

“The kind we don’t give,” Luca said flatly.

“I’ll go,” I said.

Luca scoffed. “You think he’ll talk to a Falcone?”

“No,” I replied. “But he might talk to her.”

Every eye turned to Isabella.

She didn’t flinch.

“Tell me when and where,” she said.

That night, before we left, I knocked on her door.

She opened it, dressed in black. Tactical. Efficient. Deadly beautiful.

“You don’t have to do this,” I told her.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I do.”

I stepped closer.

“We don’t have rules between us, Isabella. But I need to ask you something anyway.”

She tilted her head.

“If I have to choose between the truth and you,” I whispered, “what would you choose?”

She looked at me like I was the only thing in the world worth breaking for.

“Then don’t make me choose,” she said.

And then she kissed me.

Not like a woman in love.

Not like a spy.

But like someone saying goodbye.

And suddenly, I was terrified.

Not of the mission.

Not of the Cerchio Nero.

But of what it would cost me to let her walk away.

The drive to Catania was quiet.

Just me, Isabella, and Matteo in the back of a black SUV.

She stared out the window, her hand resting on the file between us.

“Do you believe in fate?” she asked suddenly.

“No,” I replied. “I believe in choice.”

She nodded slowly. “Then maybe this is mine.”

I looked away.

Because I wasn’t sure what I’d do if she never came back.

The meeting was set for midnight.

A warehouse by the port. Abandoned, but not empty.

As we approached, Matteo whispered, “Two snipers on the roof. Unmarked car behind the container. They’re ready for betrayal.”

“Then we don’t betray them,” Isabella said.

She stepped forward alone.

The arms dealer, a wiry man with a burned face and eyes like a hawk, emerged from the shadows.

He smiled when he saw her.

“Figlia dell’ombra,” he said. Daughter of the shadow.

“You remember me,” Isabella replied.

“I remember your fire.”

They spoke in hushed tones.

She offered information. Names. Secrets only a Falcone insider could know.

In exchange, he gave her a name.

Not Russo.

Not a Falcone.

But a third player.

Someone pulling strings from Rome.

Someone both families once feared.

And just as she turned to leave, the arms dealer leaned in.

“You’re not done yet,” he whispered. “There’s something buried under Falcone blood. Something even you don’t see.”

Back in the car, she didn’t speak.

I didn’t push.

But I saw it in her eyes.

Everything had changed.

And whatever we were heading toward now…

Was bigger than her revenge.

It was the truth.

And truth, in our world, is the most dangerous weapon of all.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Isabella

Some secrets are buried beneath blood.

Others, beneath silence.

But the most dangerous kind—the ones that truly haunt you

Are buried inside you.

And tonight, one of those secrets clawed its way to the surface.

The moment the car doors shut behind us, the name whispered by the arms dealer echoed in my skull like a curse I couldn’t shake.

Not Russo. Not a Falcone.

Arturo Bellandi.

I hadn’t heard that name in years. And I had tried to forget it.

But you never really forget the man who broke you.

The man who promised protection and delivered betrayal.

The man who sold my brother’s life for territory.

I sat across from Alessandro in the dark SUV, watching his face as the lights of Catania blurred past the windows. He was calm. Too calm. The kind of stillness that masks a storm beneath the surface.

He hadn’t asked what the dealer told me.

Not yet.

He was giving me time to speak.

And that, somehow, was worse than pressure.

Because I didn’t know how.

Not without ripping open old wounds and making the question everything about me.

Back at the estate, I stepped out of the car before it even stopped rolling and headed straight to my room.

I needed air. Solitude.

Control.

But I should have known Alessandro wouldn’t let me run.

Five minutes later, the door opened behind me.

He didn’t speak.

He didn’t move.

He just stood there, his presence heavy in the air.

Finally, I turned to face him.

His voice was low. Even.

But deadly sharp.

“Tell me what he said.”

I swallowed.

“He gave me a name.”

“And?”

“It’s someone I thought was dead,” I whispered. “Someone I hoped was dead.”

He stepped closer. “Who?”

“Arturo Bellandi.”

His expression didn’t change. But I saw it in his eyes.

Recognition. Rage.

And fear.

Not for himself.

For me.

“Who is he to you?” he asked.

I laughed bitterly. “Once? A protector. A mentor. I was sixteen. He found me in Milan, and took me in. Said he’d help me find justice for my brother.”

“And?”

“He sold me,” I said. “To Cerchio Nero. Trained me to be useful, to be loyal. Then handed me over as a bargaining chip when I asked too many questions.”

Alessandro’s jaw clenched so hard I thought he might shatter his teeth.

“You got out,” he said. “How?”

I looked down.

“I didn’t,” I whispered. “I survived.”

Silence fell between us.

Not cold. Not hostile.

But thick. Too full of what neither of us was saying.

I finally looked up.

“I didn’t tell you because I was ashamed. And because I didn’t know if I could face him again without… becoming her.”

“Who?”

“The girl I used to be,” I said. “The one who trusted monsters because they called themselves men.”

Alessandro stepped forward, closing the space between us.

He didn’t touch me.

Not yet.

But his voice was softer now. Lower.

“You’re not that girl anymore.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Sometimes I feel like she’s still inside me, waiting. Hungry.”

“You’re stronger than you think.”

“And what if I’m not?” I asked. “What if I break?”

“Then I’ll be there to pick up the pieces.”

That made me look up

And what I saw in his eyes wasn’t just affection. Or sympathy. Or even desire.

It was belief.

He believed in me, even when I couldn’t.

Maybe especially then.

That night, I didn’t sleep.

I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, listening to the rain hit the windows like a warning.

My past was coming for me.

And it wouldn’t knock.

It would kick down the door.

At dawn, I stood on the training field behind the villa, letting the wind cut through me like ice.

I moved like a ghost—silent, precise, ruthless.

The way Arturo taught me.

The way Alessandro feared I might still be.

Every hit on the punching bag was a promise.

Every breath was a countdown.

I didn’t know how the next days would unfold.

But I knew one thing:

When Arturo Bellandi resurfaced…

I wouldn’t run.

I would end him.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Alessandro

They say the past is dead.

But in Sicily, we bury our ghosts shallow.

And mine are starting to claw through the dirt.

I didn’t sleep after Isabella told me about Arturo Bellandi.

While the rain whispered across the villa’s tiled roof, I stood in my father’s old office with a glass of whiskey in hand and a memory I hadn’t touched in over a decade.

Arturo was a name we weren’t supposed to speak.

A former consigliere to a rival family. Charming. Sharp. Ruthless beneath expensive suits and elegant words. He disappeared after a deal with my father went south, and everyone assumed he’d been silenced—by us, or by his own.

But if he was alive…

And if he’d sold Isabella to Cerchio Nero?

Then this wasn’t just personal.

It was war.

At sunrise, I made a call. A private line. One even Luca didn’t know I kept.

“Ciao,” the voice answered. Raspy. Old.

“Domenico,” I said. “I need a ghost traced.”

There was a pause. Then, “Name?”

“Bellandi. Arturo.”

“Holy God,” he breathed. “You sure?”

“No,” I said. “That’s the problem.”

“I’ll dig.”

“Quietly.”

“Always.”

I ended the call and looked down at the photograph on the desk. My mother. My father. All six of us boys, lined up like little soldiers.

I was the oldest. The example.

The one who always made the hard choices.

And I was about to make another.

Three hours later, I met Luca in the south wing, where he was going over surveillance reports from Palermo.

“You’re up early,” he said without looking.

“You’re always surprised by that.”

He smirked. “Not surprised. Just worried.”

I ignored that.

“I need access to Father’s archives.”

That made him pause.

He turned. “Which part?”

“The classified section.”

He studied me. “What are you looking for?”

“An old ally.”

Luca narrowed his eyes. “Or an old threat?”

“Depends on what I find.”

“You really think Bellandi’s alive?”

“I think Isabella believes he is.”

“And you believe her.”

“I do.”

Luca leaned back, folding his arms.

“She’s dangerous.”

“She’s necessary.”

He grunted. “And if she’s lying?”

“Then I’ll find out.”

“And if she’s telling the truth?”

I looked him dead in the eye.

“Then I’ll kill him myself.”

The archives were buried beneath the villa, locked behind biometric scans and silent halls that smelled like dust and secrets.

I hadn’t been down here since my father’s funeral.

Some of the files were digital. Most were not.

Old-school paranoia. My father didn’t trust servers or screens.

So I went through paper. Pages that bled history. Names written in blood and crossed out with pencil.

It took hours.

But eventually… I found it.

A contract.

Signed by Bellandi. Stamped by the Cerchio Nero.

He had worked with them. But not as a pawn.

As a handler.

He’d recruited women.

Younger. Smart. Easy to manipulate.

Trained them. Used them. Sold them.

And Isabella’s name was on the list.

Next to a codename: Vespera.

My breath caught.

I closed the file and leaned against the wall.

She hadn’t told me everything.

And maybe she had her reasons.

But I couldn’t afford half-truths anymore.

Not with a war brewing.

Later that night, I found her in the library, curled in one of the velvet chairs with a book she wasn’t reading.

She looked up as I entered. Her eyes tired. Guarded.

“You found something,” she said.

I nodded.

“Bellandi trained you. Used you.”

She flinched. Just slightly. But enough.

I walked to the window, staring out into the darkness beyond the olive trees.

“You were codenamed Vespera.”

Silence.

“I’m not angry,” I said. “I’m not accusing you.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Trying to understand,” I replied. “Because the more I learn, the more I realize you’re fighting a war inside yourself—and I need to know which side I’m helping win.”

Her voice was a whisper.

“I’m fighting to stop being a weapon.”

I turned to face her.

“And I’m afraid you still are one. One pointed at my family… or at yourself.”

She stood now, the book forgotten.

“I didn’t choose that name,” she said. “I didn’t ask for any of it. But I survived it. And now I’m trying to dismantle everything they made me.”

“And what if dismantling it destroys you too?”

She walked up to me, inches from my chest.

“Then let it.”

Her voice trembled. Her hands didn’t.

I reached up and cupped her face gently.

“I won’t,” I said. “I won’t let it destroy you.”

She didn’t cry. She didn’t pull away.

But she leaned her forehead against my chest, and I felt her exhale like it was the only breath she’d taken all day.

That night, she didn’t return to her room.

She stayed with me.

Not in the way people do when they want to forget.

But in the way people do when they finally want to be seen.

And as she slept, curled beside me, I watched the shadows move across the ceiling.

Bellandi was alive.

Vespera was real.

But so was she.

And I would burn this world to the ground before I let it take her from me again.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Isabella

They always said the truth would set you free.

They never mentioned it might break your heart first.

I knew he'd gone digging.

It was in his silence.

In the way his touch lingered just a second too long—like he wasn't sure if he was still allowed to hold me.

In the way, his eyes flicked away when I caught him watching me as if he was trying to memorize a version of me he'd thought he knew.

But most of all, I knew because I would've done the same.

Because trust in this world isn't given. It's tested.

And I had given him enough reasons to question everything.

I left his room before the sun rose.

Not because I wanted distance.

But because I needed clarity.

I stood beneath the cold spray of the shower, letting the water drown the ghost of her — Vespera.

The name tasted like metal and ash.

She was never real. Just a mask they made me wear. A tool. A weapon. A beautiful lie painted in blood and obedience.

But now that mask was cracking… and Alessandro had seen what was underneath.

Would he still want me, now that he knew?

Or had I always been something to fix, not something to love?

By noon, I was in the greenhouse—one of the only places on the estate that hadn't been touched by the shadows of the past.

I let my fingers brush over the rosemary leaves, the scent grounding me in something real.

Alive.

"Thought I might find you here," came his voice behind me.

I didn't turn. Not yet.

"I couldn't sleep," I said.

"Me neither."

A pause.

Then, "You knew I looked."

I nodded. "Yes."

He came to stand beside me.

"I didn't want to hide it," he said. "But I had to be sure."

"Of what?"

"That you weren't still working for them."

That stung. Not because he was wrong to wonder.

But because I hated that I had ever made it plausible.

"I'm not," I said quietly. "Haven't been for years."

"Why didn't you tell me about Vespera?"

I smiled, bitter and small. "Because that name isn't mine. It's theirs. And every time I say it, it feels like I'm permitting them to own me again."

He didn't answer.

Instead, he reached down and picked a sprig of rosemary, twirling it between his fingers.

“They trained you to seduce, manipulate, and kill. But you survived. You escaped. That means you beat them.”

I looked at him, my throat tightening.

“Did I?” I whispered. “Or did I just become exactly what they wanted?”

“No,” he said, firm now. “You became someone they couldn’t control. That’s why they lost you.”

I wanted to believe that.

I needed to believe that.

But there was more.

And I couldn’t carry it alone anymore.

“There’s something I haven’t told you.”

He looked at me then, fully, his jaw tight but his eyes open.

“I’m listening.”

I drew a breath that scraped like glass.

“When I escaped them… I didn’t do it alone.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“There was someone. A guard. Young. He… he helped me. Gave me a map. A passcode. He paid for it with his life.”

I looked away.

“I never even knew his name. But he believed I was worth saving. And sometimes, I wonder if that belief was a mistake.”

Alessandro reached for my hand, gently curling his fingers around mine.

“It wasn’t,” he said. “You were worth saving then. And you still are now.”

And in that moment, I believed him.

Because Alessandro wasn’t just offering me safety.

He was offering redemption.

That night, I wrote the name Vespera on a piece of paper.

Then I burned it.

Let the ashes scatter on the wind outside the balcony.

It wasn’t erasure.

It was released.

And tomorrow?

Tomorrow we'd start hunting Arturo Bellandi.

Together.

Not because I needed revenge.

But because I needed to close the door on the girl I used to be

So the woman I was becoming could finally breathe.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Alessandro

The deeper you dig into hell,

The more you realize

Some of the monsters wear your last name.

I couldn't stop thinking about the name.

Arturo Bellandi.

It echoed like a curse in every hallway of the villa. His shadow stretched far—longer than I ever imagined.

And now that I knew what he'd done to Isabella…

What he made her?

There was no turning back.

This wasn't just about her anymore.

It was about us. About every woman he had ever broken.

About what kind of man I'd be if I let him walk away from that.

But there was another problem.

He hadn't disappeared.

He'd hidden—in plain sight.

And to hide in our world…

You needed inside help.

I called a meeting.

Not with the full family. Just my brothers.

Luca. Matteo. Dante. Enzo. Nico.

Six sons of a dead king. Raised in blood, forged in fire.

We sat at the long mahogany table in the war room—an oval room lined with old maps, oil paintings, and weapons that hadn't been used since the 90s. My father used to call it "the cathedral." His own private church of power.

It felt colder now.

Colder… and watched.

I started without preamble.

"Bellandi is alive. He's working under a different name—possibly through Eastern European arms syndicates. I want him found."

Luca swore under his breath. Matteo leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. Enzo glanced at Dario, who said nothing, only drummed his fingers on the table's edge.

Only Nico—my youngest brother—spoke up.

"Why now? We haven't heard his name in a decade."

"Because I have evidence," I said. "He's connected to Cerchio Nero. And he trained Isabella."

That got everyone's attention.

Matteo sat up straighter. "What do you mean trained her?"

I told them everything. Not all the details—Isabella's pain wasn't mine to give away—but enough.

Enough to shift the mood from curiosity to rage.

"She was trafficked," I said quietly. "Used as bait, trained as a weapon. Bellandi was behind it."

Luca's expression darkened. "So why hasn't he been executed?"

"Because we don't know where he is. Yet."

Enzo narrowed his eyes. "And you trust her? Fully?"

I looked at him.

"I trust her more than I trust half the people at this table."

The silence that followed was heavy.

Dario leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

"You think one of us is leaking?"

"I think someone close is keeping secrets. And if Bellandi has allies within this family, I'll rip them out by the root."

After the meeting, I stayed behind.

Luca lingered too.

He shut the door quietly and turned to me.

“You think its Dario, don’t you?”

I hesitated.

“He’s been distant,” I admitted. “Makes odd calls. Takes long trips with no reports. But it’s not just him.”

Luca raised an eyebrow.

“Then who?”

I looked him dead in the eye.

“I don’t know. That’s what scares me.”

Later that night, I found Isabella in the piano room.

She wasn’t playing.

She was staring at the keys like they were the trigger to a bomb she wasn’t sure she wanted to detonate.

I leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed.

“Do you know the last song my mother played?” I asked quietly.

She looked up, surprised.

“No.”

“Clair de Lune. She used to say it reminded her that beauty could still exist in a world made of knives.”

Isabella stood slowly.

“What reminds you of that now?”

I didn’t have to think.

“You.”

She came closer, her gaze wary but open.

“Even after what you learned?”

“Especially after what I learned.”

She reached out, lightly brushing her fingers along my wrist.

“We’re not safe yet.”

“No,” I said. “But we’re closer.”

“To what?”

“Justice. Maybe peace.”

She tilted her head. “And revenge?”

I looked at her then—not just her face, but her soul.

And I said the only truth that mattered.

“Only if it comes with your freedom.”

That night, after she fell asleep in my arms, I received a text on my encrypted line.

Unknown number. No name.

Just a message:

“Bellandi is in Rome. Two nights. Come alone.”

I stared at the screen, heart thudding like a war drum.

The hunt had begun.

And I wasn’t sure I’d make it out the other side without losing everything I cared about.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Isabella

There’s a silence that follows truth.

It’s not peace.

It’s the breath you take before the storm answers back.

He was gone when I woke up.

The space beside me was cold, the bedsheets unwrinkled as he’d never even been there.

But the scent of him still lingered—bergamot, leather, and gunpowder. It clung to my skin, to the pillow, to the memory of his hands tangled in my hair the night before.

I sat up slowly, fingers curling around the silk sheet as if it could ground me.

A part of me expected this.

Men like Alessandro didn’t stay long when their minds were set on revenge.

But still… I had hoped.

I moved through the villa like a ghost, eyes scanning every corner for signs of him.

Luca was in the training room, covered in sweat, shirtless, and savage as he slammed his fists into the heavy bag.

Nico was in the library, flipping through dossiers like they held the key to the universe.

But none of them looked at me the same anymore.

They knew.

And even if they didn’t blame me, they saw the fractures now.

The secrets. The woman Alessandro was willing to burn the world for.

Dario wouldn't meet my gaze.

Enzo smiled too easily.

And Matteo asked me the one thing I couldn’t answer.

“Would you die for him?”

I didn’t respond.

Because the truth was—I already had. Over and over, in silence.

I found the note in my coat pocket hours later. Folded small. Tucked deep. His handwriting—sharp, clean, calculated.

> Isabella,

If you find this before I return, don’t follow me.

This is my war. Not yours.

—A

He should have known better.

I didn’t survive hell to sit and wait for a man to come home in a body bag.

By nightfall, I was on a private jet bound for Rome.

I didn’t ask for permission.

I didn’t tell his brothers.

Because I knew where he was going.

And I knew Bellandi wouldn’t wait long to kill him.

I sat alone, legs crossed, one hand curled around the grip of a concealed weapon, the other resting against the window as the sky turned from sapphire to pitch.

I wasn’t afraid.

I was furious.

Not at Alessandro.

But at the world that made him believe he had to protect me by leaving me behind.

I landed in Rome just past midnight.

It had rained recently—streets glistened under the streetlights like oil-slicked mirrors.

The air smelled like wet stone and cigarette smoke.

Old cities have a way of reminding you they’ve buried more secrets than you’ll ever uncover.

I slid into the waiting car. The driver didn’t speak. He didn’t have to.

He was one of Alessandro’s men—former Mossad, now loyal to the Romano family.

He handed me a burner phone as we pulled into the traffic.

Only one message on it:

> Location confirmed. Two hours left. Bring backup or walk away.

I didn’t do either.

Instead, I slipped a blade into my boot, loaded the silencer on the pistol beneath my jacket, and stared at my reflection in the rearview mirror.

No Vespera.

No victim.

Just Isabella Romano—whatever that meant now.

By the time we reached the abandoned villa on the outskirts of Rome, the moon was a thin blade overhead, slicing through the black clouds.

I stepped out of the car into silence. The kind of silence that made your skin tighten.

There were footprints in the gravel—fresh. And a set of drag marks leading to the back entrance.

I moved quietly, heart steady.

No hesitation.

I wasn’t coming to save Alessandro.

I was coming to fight beside him.

Because that’s what love looked like when you were raised by wolves.

Inside the villa, I found a trail of blood.

It led to the cellar.

And when I opened the door, I heard it

A voice I hadn’t heard in six years.

Cold. Charismatic. Cruel.

Bellandi.

And Alessandro’s voice—low, steady, full of venom.

“You’re going to die tonight, old man.”

I moved faster.

One floor down. Two guards. Three seconds. Two bullets.

No hesitation.

By the time I stepped into the room, Alessandro was bruised and bleeding but still standing.

And Bellandi?

He turned slowly, smiling like the devil wearing a priest’s skin.

“Well, well,” he said. “Vespera returns.”

I didn’t flinch.

“My name,” I said coldly, “is Isabella.”

And then I raised the gun.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Alessandro

There’s a moment

Just before you pull the trigger

When you ask yourself if this death will fix what’s broken.

The answer is always no.

But we do it anyway.

I wasn’t supposed to be surprised.

Not by her.

Not anymore.

But when Isabella stepped into that cellar, gun raised, shoulders squared like a soldier on a battlefield she’d already died on once

I forgot how to breathe.

Blood ran down my temple. My knuckles were bruised. One rib was either cracked or shattered—I could feel it shifting every time I moved.

But I stood taller the moment I saw her.

She wasn’t Vespera now. She wasn’t the assassin or the spy or the survivor.

She was just her.

And even covered in dirt, sweat, and shadows

She was the most terrifyingly beautiful thing I had ever seen.

Bellandi noticed it, too.

His smirk deepened, cruel and familiar. Like watching a ghost grin.

“You always did prefer broken things, Alessandro,” he said, voice soaked in venom. “Toys you could fix. Wounds you could stitch.”

I took a step forward.

“She’s not broken,” I said. “She survived you. That makes her the strongest person in this room.”

Bellandi clicked his tongue.

“Strong? Or still obedient?” He turned to Isabella. “Tell me, Carina, do you still dream in Russian commands and Italian blood?”

I felt her stillness—like a blade waiting for the wind to strike.

And then she spoke, calm and cold.

“I dream of your funeral. And the silence after.”

I moved in then.

Not to shoot him. Not yet.

But to take back control.

Bellandi was bound to a rusted chair, his arms bloodied, and his face half-swollen from the interrogation. We’d pulled Intel from him already—enough to burn half of Eastern Europe’s underground network.

But it wasn’t enough.

I wanted more.

I wanted everything.

“You trafficked children,” I said. “Built armies from orphans. Sold daughters to kings and pretended you were giving them crowns.”

Bellandi only laughed. “And yet here you are, wearing my sins like a family crest.”

That’s when Isabella snapped.

She crossed the room, fast and precise, and slammed the butt of her pistol across his jaw. Blood sprayed against the concrete.

I didn’t stop her.

Not this time.

Because I needed to see it, too.

Not vengeance.

But closure.

When it was over—when Bellandi lay unconscious, tied to a new chain, his fate decided but not yet sealed—we left him in the dark.

And I took her upstairs, out of that cold place, to where the night air still smelled like rain and ruin.

We didn’t speak at first.

The city of Rome glowed in the distance. Gold lights. Holy domes. The illusion of peace.

I leaned against the hood of the car, watching her pace.

“You shouldn’t have come,” I said quietly.

She turned to me, fire in her eyes.

“You left me a note, Alessandro. You thought I’d stay?”

“I didn’t want you to see this side of me.”

She stepped closer.

“I’ve seen every side of you. And I’m still here.”

I looked down.

She reached out, fingers brushing my chest just above the bruises.

“Why is it so hard for you to trust that I’m not afraid of you?”

“Because I’m still afraid of myself,” I whispered.

She didn’t move away.

Instead, she leaned in and pressed her lips to mine—soft at first, then deeper, heavier, like she was kissing away every monster that lived in me.

I wrapped my arms around her like she was the only thing left that could keep me whole.

And maybe she was.

That night, we didn’t make love.

We claimed each other.

Slow. Intentional. Wordless.

It wasn’t about pleasure or escape.

It was about finally finding a home in someone else’s scars.

Later, she lay tangled in sheets, bare shoulders illuminated by the moonlight through the window.

She turned her head toward me.

“What now?” she whispered.

I looked at her.

“At sunrise,” I said, “he dies.”

“And after that?”

I smiled faintly, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

“After that… we begin again.”

Chapter Thirty: Isabella

I always believed the hardest part of my life ended when I ran.

But now I know the truth:

The hardest part is learning how to stay.

The morning light filtered through thin curtains like liquid gold, warming the room before I even opened my eyes.

But I didn’t need sight to know he was still there.

I felt Alessandro's presence like a second skin—heavy, grounding, and impossibly still.

He was lying beside me, shirtless, one arm folded behind his head, eyes fixed on the ceiling like it held the answers he didn’t dare speak aloud.

I watched him for a while.

The way his chest rose and fell in slow rhythm.

The scar near his ribs I hadn’t seen before.

The tension in his jaw, even in silence.

He was here.

But his mind was already in the fire.

“Do you regret it?” I asked quietly.

He didn’t turn. “Regret what?”

“Letting me follow you.”

He exhaled slowly. “I regret leaving you in the first place.”

There was so much between us that didn’t need words.

But still—I needed more than silence.

So I sat up, drawing the sheets around me, legs tucked beneath me like a question.

“Then why do I feel like you’re already leaving again?”

This time, he did look at me.

His eyes were tired. Not from lack of sleep—but from carrying a war too long alone.

“You deserve more than this life,” he said.

I shook my head. “That’s not your decision to make.”

“It’s mine if choosing you puts a target on your back.”

“Alessandro…” I leaned forward, voice low. “I was born with a target on mine. I spent years trying to outrun it. But maybe I was never meant to run. Maybe I was meant to return—with a gun in one hand, and you in the other.”

He didn’t answer at first.

Just reached out, fingers grazing the edge of my jaw, like I was some fragile thing he wasn’t sure he deserved to touch.

“I love you,” he said.

It wasn’t soft.

It was jagged. Ripped from somewhere deep.

A confession born of fire.

I swallowed, heart thundering in my chest.

“You’re allowed to love me,” I whispered. “Even if it terrifies you.”

His thumb brushed my cheek.

“It’s not the loving that scares me,” he murmured. “It’s what I’d do to keep you.”

And suddenly I understood.

He wasn’t afraid I’d die because of him.

He was afraid of who he’d become trying to save me.

We spent the rest of the morning in silence, not because there was nothing left to say—but because the quiet felt like a temporary truce with the world.

But even peace has a deadline.

By noon, Luca was at the door.

“Everything’s in place,” he said. “Bellandi’s fate is yours to decide.”

Alessandro stood, muscles tense, voice steel. “Then it’s time.”

He didn’t look back at me as he dressed.

Didn’t kiss me before he left the room.

And maybe that hurt more than a bullet.

But I understood.

Some battles you fight alone, not because you want to—but because they’re written in your blood.

I didn’t wait.

I followed twenty minutes later, dressed in black, gun strapped to my thigh, hair pulled back.

This wasn’t about love now.

This was about legacy.

About finally ending the man who made monsters of us all.

The warehouse on the edge of the city was cold and silent. The air reeked of dust and iron and history.

Bellandi was still chained.

Still breathing.

Still smiling.

“Two of you now,” he said. “How poetic.”

Alessandro stepped forward first.

“I won’t torture you,” he said calmly. “You’re not worth the mess.”

“Then why are you trembling?” Bellandi taunted.

But he wasn’t trembling.

Not anymore.

Not when I stepped beside him, fingers brushing his.

Not when we stood shoulder to shoulder—two children of darkness finally ready to bury the man who birthed it.

And when Alessandro raised his gun, I didn’t stop him.

But I placed my hand over his.

And together—we pulled the trigger.

The shot echoed.

Bellandi slumped, dead before he hit the floor.

And still, there was no relief.

Only silence.

And the strange sensation of something ending inside me I hadn’t realized was still alive.

Outside, the sky was overcast.

Alessandro turned to me.

“It’s done.”

I nodded.

But in my chest, something whispered: It’s only just beginning.

Because now we had to return to Sicily.

To his brothers.

To our family.

To a world that wouldn’t welcome what we’d become without blood on the floor.

But I would stand beside him.

In every war.

In every sunrise.

In every vow not yet spoken.

Because love wasn’t a soft thing.

It was a blade.

And I was finally ready to wield it.

Chapter Thirty-One: Alessandro

Some men inherit kingdoms.

Others, legacies soaked in blood.

I inherited both.

And today, I planned to burn them clean.

The road to the villa twisted through olive groves and stone hills like a serpent—silent, ancient, familiar.

Sicily was in my bones.

Not the way a place feels like home, but the way it haunts you even when you're miles away.

Every kilometer we drove, I felt the weight return.

Memories built from marble and murder.

The ghosts of my father. My past.

My brothers.

All waiting for me.

I glanced sideways.

Isabella sat beside me in the back of the armored Maserati, dressed in tailored black, her expression unreadable, her body still.

She hadn’t spoken since we left Rome.

Not because there was nothing to say.

But because sometimes silence is the strongest declaration of alliance.

She was here.

With me.

Despite everything.

And I didn’t know how to deserve it.

The villa rose from the cliffs like a cathedral of shadows.

Guards in crisp suits. Cameras disguised as doves. A chapel on one side, a crypt on the other.

Home.

I stepped out of the car first, and the silence that fell was immediate. Men paused. Eyes lowered. A murmur swept across the courtyard like the wind knew I had changed.

And then came my brothers.

Domenico first — the second-born, sharp-eyed and colder than ice.

Then Raffaele — too handsome to trust, too clever to cage.

Matteo. Enzo. Luca already stood behind me.

And lastly, the youngest—Silvio. Still too angry to love properly.

Six sons of a dead king.

Only one throne.

And the moment they saw Isabella at my side, something shifted.

“What is this?” Domenico asked, arms folded.

“My partner,” I said calmly. “In business and blood.”

Raffaele smirked. “What kind of blood? Yours or hers?”

I stepped forward. “Bellandi is dead.”

That froze them.

Matteo exhaled. Enzo muttered a curse. Silvio looked up sharply.

“Dead?” Luca echoed behind me. “Shot. Burned. Buried.”

“Who gave the order?” Domenico asked.

“I did,” I said. “And she pulled the trigger with me.”

Silence again.

And then

Matteo started to clap.

Soft, slow, ironic. “Well. Looks like a big brother finally grew a heart and a pair.”

“Careful, Matteo,” I warned.

But Isabella only tilted her head.

“If you'd like to test either,” she said, voice like velvet over steel, “I'll be glad to demonstrate what else I’m capable of.”

We were invited inside only because no one dared deny us.

The villa’s halls hadn’t changed—stone arches, brass fixtures, tapestries older than all of us. The dining room still smelled like war plans and whiskey.

I didn’t sit at the head of the table.

Not yet.

But I stood behind it.

And when my brothers finally took their seats, I spoke.

“The family has splintered,” I began. “Each of you pulling strings in different cities. Different syndicates. Different sins.”

Raffaele raised an eyebrow. “And you want to unify it?”

“No,” I said. “I want to remake it.”

Domenico laughed bitterly. “You think one death fixes the system?”

“No,” I said. “But it starts a new one.”

For the next hour, we argued.

Power. Profit. Bloodlines. Honor.

The old rules.

And then I told them my plan.

Not to erase the mafia.

But to restructure it.

To control not just crime, but the very roots of corruption—banking, government, and law enforcement.

To go legitimate on the surface.

And rule from the shadows.

It wasn’t idealistic.

It was strategic.

And terrifyingly efficient.

And when I finished, no one spoke for a long time.

Until Silvio, the youngest, finally leaned back and said:

“I’ll follow you. But only if she does.”

His eyes were on Isabella.

She met his gaze without blinking.

“I follow no man,” she said. “But I choose this one.”

Then she looked at me, and her voice softened.

“And I’ll stand beside him until the last bullet falls.”

Later, in my father’s old office, I stood alone before the portrait of the old Don—his eyes cold, mouth unforgiving.

I hated him.

But tonight, I almost thanked him.

Because without his cruelty, I would have never become the man Isabella could choose.

She entered the room quietly.

“You were born for this,” she said.

“No,” I answered. “I was born into it. There's a difference.”

She came to me, resting her hand over my chest.

“You carry it like a burden. But what if it could be a crown?”

I looked at her then.

And for the first time—I didn’t see just fire and vengeance.

I saw our future.

A family not built from fear, but from survival and choice.

Maybe even love.

And that night, in the heart of the villa that raised me…

I finally allowed myself to believe we could be more than weapons.

We could be something worth protecting.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Isabella

There’s something sacred about walking into a room full of men who doubt you and leaving them silent.

The morning after the blood pact at the villa, I didn’t wait for Alessandro to wake.

I had spent too many years letting men decide when I could speak.

Not today.

Not anymore.

The marble floors were colder than they looked, but I walked barefoot, hair still wet from the shower, dressed in black slacks and a loose white blouse, gun holstered at my back.

The conference room doors were already open.

They hadn’t expected me.

Even better.

All five brothers were there—Domenico, Matteo, Enzo, Raffaele, and Silvio—leaning over maps, murmuring over surveillance photos, arguing in low Sicilian like strategy was a war dance.

When I stepped inside, the conversation stopped.

Five sets of eyes turned toward me.

Five legacies of violence and power.

I didn’t flinch.

“Where’s Alessandro?” Domenico asked flatly.

“Sleeping,” I said. “I didn’t ask his permission to come.”

Raffaele chuckled, drumming his fingers. “That much is clear.”

Matteo didn’t smile. “This is family business.”

“So is mine,” I replied. “And if I’m going to survive in it, I need to know the shape of the battlefield.”

Enzo crossed his arms. “What makes you think we’ll trust you?”

I stepped closer, slow and deliberate, hands at my sides, voice calm.

“I don’t need your trust,” I said. “I need your respect. And if you’re too blinded by tradition to see what I bring to this table, then you’re not the leaders your bloodlines demand.”

That struck a nerve.

Domenico stood, his stare hard as stone.

“You killed Bellandi,” he said.

I nodded. “With Alessandro.”

“Do you even know what that means?”

“I know exactly what it means,” I replied. “And I know that by killing him, I closed a chapter none of you were brave enough to end.”

Matteo stepped forward next.

“You think killing one man makes you worthy of this life?”

“No,” I said. “But surviving one like him does.”

The room went quiet.

Because they knew what I meant.

Because whether they’d admit it or not, every man in that room had once been a boy with fear in his throat and no one to save him.

Bellandi hadn’t just ruined Alessandro.

He’d fractured this entire family.

Silvio, who’d been quiet until now, finally spoke.

“You talk like someone who’s lost more than we know.”

I met his eyes.

“I’ve bled enough to write my own history in red.”

Silence again.

Then Raffaele pushed his chair back and leaned forward.

“If you want to sit at this table, then you get one chance to prove yourself.”

“Name it.”

He tossed a folder across the table.

“Her name is Elisabetta Fiore. High-end art dealer. She’s been leaking Intel to the Russians for six months. We need someone to shut her down.”

“I assume you don’t mean with a phone call.”

Matteo smirked. “We mean permanently.”

I opened the folder.

Blonde. Early forties. Too beautiful for someone that dangerous.

I closed it slowly.

“Done.”

Domenico raised an eyebrow. “No hesitation?”

“I don’t hesitate with traitors,” I said. “And I don’t need a man to carry my gun.”

Later that afternoon, I left the villa in a car driven by one of Luca’s men.

No backup. No threats. Just a woman with a gun and a promise to keep.

Elisabetta Fiore lived in Palermo—in a penthouse above a gallery that trafficked in secrets more than sculpture.

She didn’t see me coming.

And when she begged, I didn’t flinch.

Because I had begged too once.

And no one listened.

The shot was clean.

Right between the eyes.

No drama. No speech. No remorse.

I left her with a silver coin in her hand.

A warning to the next traitor: Even the shadows have guardians now.

When I returned to the villa that night, Alessandro was waiting on the balcony.

He didn’t ask what happened.

He only looked at me, eyes dark, and voice low.

“Are you okay?”

I stepped into his arms, the tension slipping from my shoulders like silk.

“I am now.”

He kissed the top of my head.

“Silvio told me what you said.”

“Did he like it?”

“He said you were the most dangerous woman he’s ever met.”

I smiled. “That’s a compliment.”

“It is,” he whispered. “But it also terrifies me.”

I looked up at him, fingers brushing his jaw.

“Good,” I said. “Because now you’ll never forget who stands beside you. Not behind you.”

That night, as we lay tangled in sheets and silence, I whispered something I hadn’t dared until now.

“Do you believe we could make this last?”

He looked down at me.

Eyes softer than I'd ever seen them.

“I believe we can survive anything now.”

And somehow, that felt more powerful than any promise.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Alessandro

Power is quiet when it’s real.

No raised voices.

No broken bones.

Just a room full of men waiting to hear you speak first.

And tonight, they waited for me.

The great hall of the villa hadn’t seen such a gathering in over a decade.

All five of my brothers.

Key allies from Naples, Milan, and Zurich.

Even a delegate from the New York syndicate, flown in under a fake name and diplomatic seal.

We weren’t just talking about territory anymore.

This was about evolution.

Control over legitimate fronts: shipping, construction, tech security firms, and digital banking systems across three continents.

The old mafia had been built on fear.

The new one?

Built on information.

And no one in this room was ready to hear the price.

Except me.

I stood behind my father's chair but didn’t sit in it.

Not yet.

Let them see I wasn't eager to wear his crown.

That I intended to melt it down and recast it in steel.

"You're all here because the world is changing," I began. "And we’re no longer kings in the shadows—we're architects of systems. Either we adapt, or we drown in nostalgia."

Raffaele sipped his drink. “You speak like a CEO.”

“I speak like someone who’s buried too many brothers of the old code.”

Domenico narrowed his eyes. “You’re suggesting we go soft.”

“No,” I said. “I’m suggesting we go smarter.”

Silvio chuckled. “What does that mean, exactly?”

I let the moment, then dropped a slim black folder on the table.

Inside—names, account routes, safe houses.

And a red-stamped mark from our Zurich partners: Compromised.

"The Russians are buying their way into our financial circuits. Through art, pharmaceuticals, tech startups. We're being played.”

Gasps. Curses. One man slammed his glass down.

Raffaele looked through the file. “Where’d you get this?”

I met his eyes.

“Isabella extracted it.”

That silenced the room.

She entered then—flawless, calm, lethal in a tailored black suit and a diamond pin shaped like a dagger.

Every eye followed her.

But she only looked at me.

I held out my hand, and she came to stand beside me, not behind me.

“She’s not just my partner,” I said. “She’s our strategist.”

Domenico frowned. “She’s not blood.”

“She spilled hers for this family. That’s more than some of you ever did.”

Silvio nodded slowly. “She earned her seat.”

“More than once,” added Matteo, surprisingly serious.

Even Enzo, always the silent one, raised a glass.

“To the woman who kills with reason.”

Isabella inclined her head, but her eyes flicked to me, and only I could read the message in them:

Not yet. Not until you do what you came here to do.

The meeting stretched into the night.

Plans were made.

Alliances forged.

But my mind was on the small box in my pocket.

I’d carried it for three days now.

Waiting for the moment when war permitted me to dream.

Later, when the room emptied and only silence remained Isabella and I walked the terrace overlooking the dark sea.

“You did it,” she whispered. “They followed you.”

“They chose survival.”

“They chose you,” she corrected.

We stopped at the edge of the marble railing.

She turned toward the wind, eyes half-closed, hair pulled back into a loose braid that made her look both older and softer.

For a moment, I didn’t say anything.

Then I took out the box.

Her breath caught before she even looked.

But I didn’t open it.

Instead, I said:

“This isn't about tradition. It’s not about control. It's not even about redemption.”

She looked at me now. Eyes wide. Heart in her throat.

“This is about choosing someone when everything else tells you to walk alone.”

I opened the box.

Inside: a ring of white gold, engraved with our initials inside, wrapped around a rare Sicilian blood diamond.

“I choose you,” I said. “Now. Forever. Even if the world burns around us.”

Isabella stared at it, then at me.

“You know once I put that on, there's no taking it off.”

“I don't want it off,” I said. “I want it carved into memory. Into blood. Into legacy.”

She took the ring slowly, hands steady despite the tears welling in her eyes.

And she said the only thing that mattered:

“Then I’ll wear it until my last breath.”

We kissed under the Sicilian moon.

And at that moment—between war rooms and graveyards, blood feuds, and silence—I felt something I hadn't felt since I was a boy.

Hope

Not the fragile kind.

The steel kind.

The kind that survives.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Isabella

I’ve learned that love in our world doesn’t come with white dresses or promises whispered beneath cathedral arches.

It comes with secrets.

And the knowledge that someone, somewhere, will use them against you.

The morning after Alessandro slipped that ring onto my finger, I woke early.

Too early.

The sun had barely risen above the olive trees, and yet sleep wouldn’t return.

My fingers brushed over the band—cool against my skin, heavy with meaning.

No ceremony. No audience.

Just us.

It was perfect.

But nothing stays untouched in this world.

Not even perfect.

I dressed quickly—tight jeans, a silk blouse, and the holster at my ribs. My phone vibrated once. Then again.

Blocked number.

I answered anyway.

A pause.

Then a voice I hadn’t heard in three years.

“Well, well. The queen herself.”

I froze.

“Giada.”

She laughed—a cold, brittle sound like broken glass in a velvet box.

“You didn’t think I’d find out, did you? About you and Alessandro. About the ring.”

My blood ran cold.

“How do you know that?”

“I have my ways, cara mia. You forget—you taught me how to dig.”

Giada used to be my closest ally in Milan.

Before she betrayed me for a chance to climb higher in Bellandi’s chain.

Before I left her tied to a chair with three broken fingers and a gun pressed between her eyes—and walked away.

Apparently, she’d survived.

And she remembered.

“You made a mistake coming back into the light,” she continued. “People like us don’t get happy endings.”

“I didn’t ask for one,” I said, voice steel.

“But you took one. And now, I’ll take it back.”

The line went dead.

I didn’t tell Alessandro.

Not yet.

Because if I did, he’d scorch half of Milan trying to protect me.

And if Giada wanted war—she’d get it on my terms.

I was no longer the woman who needed saving.

By midday, I’d already arranged a meeting in Catania.

Neutral ground. High security. No weapons past the third floor.

I dressed like the storm she deserved—black leather and scarlet lips, heels sharp enough to wound.

She arrived late, of course.

Wearing sunglasses and smugness.

"Still dramatic, I see," I said coolly.

"Still breathing, I see," she replied.

We sat in silence for a beat too long.

“I don’t care why you’re here,” I said. “Just say it.”

Giada smiled.

“I want what you have. Your seat at the table. The empire you’re building. And him.”

I didn’t blink.

“He’s not a trophy.”

“No. He’s a weapon. And I want to wield him.”

That was when I leaned forward, voice low and steady.

“If you come near him, near any of them, I will burn your name from every ledger and carve your face into memory as a warning.”

Giada grinned.

“You’ve grown teeth.”

I stood.

“I’ve always had them. You just never lived long enough to see them.”

I turned and walked away.

She didn’t follow.

But I could feel her eyes like knives in my spine.

When I returned to the villa, Alessandro was waiting.

On the balcony again. A book in hand. Not reading.

“Where were you?” he asked, voice calm—but tight.

I kissed his cheek.

“Tying up old ghosts.”

He looked at me carefully.

“Do I need to worry?”

“Not yet,” I said. “But if she comes here, I won’t need your help to end her.”

He pulled me into his arms, lips against my hair.

“I know.”

Because he did.

He knew the woman he loved wasn’t delicate.

She was dangerous.

And she was his.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Alessandro

I’ve always known when I’m being lied to.

It’s not in the words.

It’s in the silence between them.

She came home with a smile and the scent of danger still clinging to her skin.

I let it go that night. Let her kiss me. Let her curl into my chest and sleep like she hadn’t stared into the eyes of someone who wanted to burn us down.

But the next morning, I woke before she did.

And went digging.

Not because I didn’t trust her.

But because I trusted the world less.

Luca was the one who found the footage.

Catania. Upper floor of the Astra building. Two cameras—off the books. One hallway. Two women.

My woman.

And a ghost from the past.

Giada Bianchi.

Isabella hadn’t said her name in years. She’d erased it with blood and silence.

And now she’d met her, alone, without backup.

Without me.

I stared at the screen too long.

Her posture. The tilt of her chin. The danger in her eyes.

She was defending something.

Me. Us.

But even as I respected it…

I hated it.

Because love wasn’t about protecting someone from their partner.

It was about carrying the weight together.

And I was ready to carry everything for her.

Even the war she was trying to fight alone.

That night, I waited until she thought I was asleep.

Watched her step out onto the terrace barefoot, wrapped in nothing but moonlight and one of my shirts.

She lit a cigarette she never intended to smoke.

Just held it. Watched it burn.

Her eyes shimmered with thought.

Or regret.

I stepped behind her, quietly.

"How long were you going to keep her from me?"

She didn’t flinch.

Didn’t turn.

Just said, “Long enough to keep your hands clean.”

“Clean?” I barked a humorless laugh. “I was born in blood, Isabella. There’s no clean.”

Finally, she turned.

"I didn’t tell you because I knew what you’d do. You’d drag the city to its knees to protect me."

"I’d do worse," I admitted. "Because I love you."

“And I love you,” she said, stepping close. “Which is why I won’t let anyone use me to break you.”

Her hands found mine. Soft but certain.

“She’s not just a threat, Ale. She’s a symbol. Of everything I walked away from.”

"Then we burn the symbol."

She looked up, eyes full of war and longing.

“No. We make her irrelevant. We win so completely she has nowhere to strike.”

I studied her for a long moment.

This wasn’t the girl I’d met in a smoky club in Naples years ago.

This was a woman of steel.

And she was mine.

The next day, I summoned the family.

No more hiding.

Giada wanted our crown?

Let her come for it.

But first we were going to build a kingdom no blade could pierce.

The plan started in silence.

Raffaele and Matteo would reroute the crypto channels. Silvio would audit every link in our Zurich systems. Domenico would handle ground Intel across Sicily.

And Isabella?

She would be my shadow and my blade.

By my side.

No more secrets. No more distance.

That night, I watched her in the war room, sleeves rolled up, arms crossed over financial maps and security reports like a queen commanding armies.

And I realized something:

She hadn’t just joined my world.

She’d claimed it.

Not behind me.

Beside me.

Before midnight, we stood alone in the armory.

The old weapons vault beneath the villa, where my father had once told me, “One day, you’ll need to choose what you protect—and what you destroy.”

I reached for a small velvet box at the back of the drawer. Not the ring. Something older.

A pin. My mother’s.

Carved with our family crest. Given only to wives.

I held it out to Isabella.

She stared at it in silence. Then looked at me, her voice almost a whisper.

“You’re sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

Her hand trembled just slightly as she pinned it to her collar.

And I whispered into her ear:

"Now the world will know whose side you stand on."

Chapter Thirty-Six: Isabella

There is a moment before every war when the world is quiet.

A breath held.

A heartbeat waiting to be broken.

This was that moment.

And I was the one who would shatter it.

Alessandro gave me power.

Not by handing it over

But by trusting me with it.

That was the difference between a crown given and a crown worn.

And tonight, I wore it well.

Giada had underestimated me.

She thought love had made me soft.

What she didn’t know was that it had made me sharper.

Colder in the places that once felt too much.

Because loving Alessandro meant protecting him, just as he protected me.

And I wouldn’t let the past unravel our future.

The plan was simple.

Lure her into thinking I was alone.

Remind her that I wasn’t.

And then take everything.

By midnight, I was seated in a high-rise above Palermo’s waterfront—glass walls, soft lights, and a bottle of vintage Brunello that neither of us would drink.

Giada walked in like she owned the sky.

Her hair was platinum now. Shorter. She wore all black.

Of course, she did.

She slid into the seat across from me, legs crossed, smiling amused.

“So this is what betrayal buys you. A view.”

I didn’t respond.

Instead, I slid a manila folder across the table.

She arched an eyebrow.

“What’s this? A ceasefire?”

“No,” I said evenly. “A eulogy.”

She opened the file. Her smile froze.

Inside were photos.

Names. Bank routes. The full list of her real allies—those who would turn on her the moment I offered them something better.

“You’ve been busy,” she muttered.

“I’m always busy when I’m cleaning up.”

Her jaw clenched. “You’ve made a mistake.”

“No, you did,” I said, voice turning sharp. “You came for my life. And in doing so, you reminded me exactly who I am.”

She stood. “You’re still the girl who ran.”

I stood, too.

“And you’re still the woman I left behind. The difference? I survived. You… are just stalling.”

Giada reached for the gun tucked at her waist.

I didn’t flinch.

Because she never got the chance to draw it.

A red dot appeared on her chest.

Then another.

Then three more.

She looked up slowly and laughed—low and bitter.

“You never were one to play fair.”

“This is fair,” I said. “You’re alive.”

She held my gaze for a long moment.

And then

She smiled.

But it wasn’t defeat.

It was something worse.

Pity.

“Then I guess you haven’t heard.”

“Heard what?”

“There’s another piece on the board, Isabella. And he doesn’t want your crown. He wants your husband’s head.”

She walked out slowly, hands raised, unarmed—but satisfied.

And I stood in the echo of her warning.

That night, I didn’t sleep.

I watched the man I loved rest beside me, unaware that a new enemy had been named.

One I hadn’t foreseen.

And as the city slept

I made a decision.

Whatever came for us next…?

I would face it before it reached him.

Even if it meant losing everything.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Alessandro

There was something in her silence.

Something that didn’t belong.

Isabella was never quiet out of fear. Or guilt. She was quiet when she was calculating.

And tonight, she barely spoke at all.

I’d learned to read the shift in her rhythm.

The way her fingers hovered longer over her wine glass.

The way her eyes flicked to the window—not out of distraction, but out of strategy.

Something was coming.

And I wasn’t sure if she was shielding me from it

Or preparing me for it.

“Isabella,” I said finally, voice low, “what aren’t you telling me?”

She blinked slowly, then turned to face me, her expression unreadable.

“I’m protecting us.”

“That’s not an answer.”

She exhaled, stood, and walked across the room.

The dress she wore hugged her like silk on steel.

“I saw Giada,” she said, and the name hit the room like thunder.

“I know,” I replied.

She turned, brows lifting. “You knew?”

“I know everything.”

Her lips curved—not in a smile, but in a grimace. “Then you know she’s not the real threat.”

I nodded slowly. “Who, then?”

She paused.

Then said one name.

One I hadn’t heard in years.

“Elio Moretti.”

My entire body tensed.

That name was buried. Dead, even.

Elio was a ghost from my father's generation-long thought executed by the Sicilian arm of the family after trying to seize control from within.

But ghosts have a way of surviving. And returning.

“Giada said he’s watching. That he wants you. Dead.”

“And you believe her?”

“I believe the timing,” she said. “He’s waited in silence. And now that we’re building something together, now that we’re”

She stopped.

I crossed the space between us.

“Say it.”

“Now that we’re stronger,” she whispered.

“And that scares him.”

We stood in silence.

I took her hand, and pressed my lips to her knuckles.

Then pulled her against me.

“I won’t let him take anything from us.”

“I know,” she whispered against my chest. “But I won’t let you be the only one bleeding for this, either.”

Later that night, after she’d fallen asleep wrapped around me like armor, I stood at the window and called Luca.

“We need eyes in Naples,” I said. “Dig into old Moretti ties. Property. Banking. Anything. I want his shadow before his voice reaches our door.”

“And if he’s already in motion?”

I stared out into the black night, jaw tight.

“Then we cut off the hand before it closes around our throat.”

The rules had changed.

This wasn’t just about Giada anymore. This was a reckoning.

One that started long before Isabella and I crossed paths.

But we would finish it.

Together.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Isabella

I never believed in ghosts.

Until one walked out of my past.

And said my name like he still owned it.

Elio Moretti was a myth whispered in blood and ash.

A name mothers used to scare their sons into silence.

But I had met him once—long before Alessandro.

I was sixteen.

Still under the thumb of my father’s command.

Still naive enough to believe there was such a thing as safe in our world.

Elio had looked at me like a weapon.

Beautiful. Untouched. Waiting to be pointed at someone else’s enemy.

And I’d looked back with fire.

Because I’d already decided:

I would never be someone else’s blade.

Now, more than a decade later, he was watching again.

Only this time, I wasn’t a girl.

And I wasn’t alone.

Alessandro thought I was sleeping when he made that call to Luca.

But I was awake.

I heard every word.

And instead of telling him I already had my plan in motion…

I kept listening.

Because two kings building toward the same war needed space—

Until the battlefield came.

That morning, I went to the abandoned vineyard outside Palermo.

One of my old networks still operated there—women I’d trained, trusted, and hidden when I left that life behind.

They owed me nothing.

But they came anyway.

Seven of them.

Still loyal.

Still deadly.

I laid out maps on the long oak table beneath the shattered skylight.

Every dot, every route, every weak point in the Moretti network that we could trace without setting off alarms.

He was careful.

But I was better.

“He’s planning something on mainland soil,” I said.

“Rome?” asked Rosa, the eldest.

I shook my head.

“No. Too exposed. Milan or Trieste.”

“Or somewhere personal,” said Livia. “He was never just tactical. He was theatrical.”

That caught me.

Because personal meant us.

Me.

Alessandro.

The wedding we still hadn’t spoken about again.

The child I hadn’t yet told him I suspected I carried.

God. The timing.

But I couldn’t think about that now.

First

We had to survive.

By sunset, the women dispersed.

Each to a different city.

Each carries a coded message.

Not to declare war

But to sound the silent horn of resistance.

I didn’t want Elio’s head yet.

I wanted his shadow.

Because you only kill a man like him once you’ve dragged his soul out into the light.

And I intended to.

When I returned to the villa that night, Alessandro was waiting for me in the hallway.

He didn’t ask where I’d been.

He didn’t have to.

He just looked into my eyes and said, “You’re not alone in this.”

I reached up, and brushed his jaw.

“You either.”

Then I took his hand.

Led him into the dark.

And made love to him like the world was ending in the morning.

Because in a way

It might.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Alessandro

There are two kinds of silence in this world.

One born from peace.

And one born from a lie.

I was standing in the middle of the second.

I knew Isabella was hiding something from me.

Not out of malice.

But out of fear.

Out of protection.

Out of love so fierce it burned her quiet.

And I would have let her keep it

If I hadn’t seen the envelope.

It wasn’t meant for me.

Tucked beneath her scarf drawer, stitched into the silk lining of a clutch she hadn’t used in years.

But when the villa’s power flickered and the generator failed, I went searching for the emergency lights.

And found it instead.

There was no name on the outside.

Just the faint press of ink—like someone had written, then erased the label.

Inside:

Coordinates.

Dates.

And one name.

"Luca Bellini.”

But not our Luca.

This was a different man.

One I hadn’t seen in seventeen years.

And one I’d buried with my own hands.

My pulse roared.

I dropped into my office, lit only by the glow of a desk lamp, and spread the documents across the mahogany.

I knew what I was looking at.

An old alliance.

Broken, but not erased.

And Isabella… had been part of it.

Or close to it.

Close enough to keep this hidden.

But why?

And why now?

I could’ve called her at that moment.

Could’ve demanded answers.

Instead, I poured a glass of scotch, swallowed it whole, and stared into the mirror across the room.

Not in my reflection.

At the monster behind it.

Because to face the truth meant unearthing more than just secrets.

It meant returning to the version of myself I’d spent years burying.

The man who didn’t ask questions

He just ended them.

Two hours later, I stepped into the night.

Luca was waiting by the car, engine idling, face grim.

“You saw it,” he said. Not a question.

“She lied.”

“No,” he replied carefully. “She survived. And there’s a difference.”

I slid into the backseat.

“We go to Naples.”

“You sure?”

“No.”

“But I’m done watching this storm gather without knowing where it started.”

The drive was long.

The city was darker than I remembered.

As we approached the northern district, my stomach twisted—not with fear.

With memory.

This was where my father made deals in basements, not boardrooms.

Where blood ran like water.

Where men like Elio were born.

And maybe

Where Isabella had once been shaped.

We pulled up outside an unmarked building near the port.

I didn’t wait for Luca.

I pushed the door open and descended the stone steps.

The air was thick.

With dust. With age. With unfinished stories.

And as I opened the final door

A voice cut through the dark.

“I was wondering when you’d come.”

Not Elio.

Not Giada.

A woman.

Older. Fierce.

Scarred.

She turned to face me with Isabella’s eyes.

Only colder.

Sharper.

“She left you a gift,” the woman said. “And a warning.”

“What kind of warning?”

She stepped forward.

“La verità ti spezzerà prima che te salvi.”

The truth will break you before it saves you.

I didn’t flinch.

Because I already knew

This wasn’t about who Isabella had been.

It was about who she might become.

And whether love could survive the truth

When the truth was a weapon.

Chapter Forty: Isabella

When I woke up, Alessandro was gone.

His side of the bed was still warm, but empty.

No note.

No call.

No scent of coffee in the air, no soft rustle of his footsteps pacing in the hall like he often did when sleep couldn’t hold him.

Just silence.

But not the comforting kind.

This silence was carved in tension.

And it screamed of one thing:

He knew.

I moved quickly, heart thrashing against my ribs, my body more aware now — too aware.

The faint nausea.

The change in my breath.

The way my hand instinctively went to my stomach before I even realized why.

I wasn’t just fighting for my life anymore.

I was fighting for ours.

I checked the drawer first.

The clutch.

The envelope.

Gone.

Of course, it was.

He’d found it.

The only piece of a life I’d buried so deeply I’d once convinced myself it hadn’t happened at all.

Except it had.

Naples.

Luca Bellini—the original one, the man I once thought could destroy me.

The reason I learned to lie before I learned to live.

And now Alessandro was walking straight into that history.

Alone.

I threw on a black coat, pulled my hair back, and grabbed my Glock from the safe in the closet.

It wasn’t dramatic.

It was survival.

By the time I reached the car, I already had three of my old contacts on a secure line.

One answered on the second ring.

“Elio’s moving,” she said. “But not toward Palermo. He’s pulling something in Trieste. Diversion.”

“What about Naples?” I asked.

She paused.

Then:

“That’s where the blood is.”

It took me four hours to get there.

By the time I stepped out into the cold night, the harbor wind sliced through my coat like broken glass.

The address was as I remembered: tucked behind rusted metal gates and forgotten alleys.

A place where secrets had been traded for favors, and favors had cost lives.

I walked in slowly.

No gun drawn.

No threats ready.

Only the weight of what I carried inside me — and the man I refused to lose.

She was waiting for me.

Of course, she was.

Elena.

One of the last women who knew the full scope of what I had done before I met Alessandro.

She hadn’t aged.

Only sharpened.

“You left breadcrumbs,” she said coldly.

“No,” I replied. “I left insurance.”

She gave a single nod.

Then stepped aside.

And there he was.

Alessandro.

Standing in the middle of the room like a ghost with skin.

He didn’t speak.

Didn’t move.

Just watched me.

Like a lion watches the storm.

And I

I walked toward him.

Because no matter how much truth lay between us

I wasn’t going to run.

Not this time.

“You lied,” he said softly.

“I protected us.”

“There’s a difference.”

I nodded. “Yes. And I made the wrong choice.”

A long silence passed.

Then:

“Why him?” Alessandro asked.

“Because he wasn’t you,” I whispered.

And then I said it.

“I was pregnant before. I lost it. And I thought… I thought I’d never survive that again.”

He closed his eyes.

Tension rippled through him.

I stepped closer.

Rested his hand gently on my stomach.

“This time, I won’t run.”

He opened his eyes.

And the anger was still there.

But beneath it — something else.

Pain.

Fear.

And something more dangerous than both:

Love.

“You should’ve told me.”

“I know.”

“And if it’s a girl?”

I smiled through the tears.

“She’ll have your fire.”

“And your silence.”

I laughed.

Then leaned into him, resting my forehead against his.

“We don’t get to choose what we come from,” I said. “But we get to choose what we become.”

That night, in the same room where I’d once bartered my soul for freedom, we stood together.

Alessandro.

Me.

And the life we were about to bring into a world that was still trying to kill us.

But not tonight.

Tonight— we lived.

Chapter Forty-One: Alessandro & Isabella

Alessandro

I’ve walked into gunfire with a steadier pulse than I have right now.

Her hand is still on my chest, soft and trembling, and mine—mine is over the slight swell of her belly, where a future I never thought I deserved now lives.

I should be furious.

I should walk away.

But I can’t.

Because somewhere between blood and betrayal, between velvet kisses and vengeance-tipped lies, I fell for her.

And I never stopped falling.

Not when I first saw her in that red silk dress.

Not when she whispered my name in the dark.

Not even now, standing in the ruins of truth.

“She’ll try to reach out,” I tell her.

“Elio?”

“No. Giada.”

Isabella stiffens.

I feel the shift in her bones before she says anything.

“You think she knows?”

“I know she does.”

Giada Bellini was always the quiet blade in our family’s arsenal. While Elio was the fire, Giada was the smoke. She got in your lungs, your eyes, your bloodstream—and you’d never notice until it was too late.

If she knew about Isabella’s past…

We weren’t just dealing with one war.

We were surrounded.

Isabella

Giada had always hated me.

She smiled with her lips, not her eyes.

She called me “la ragazza” instead of my name.

She pretended Alessandro’s love for me was some phase, a mistake wrapped in silk.

But I knew better.

Giada was obsessed with control.

And control starts with secrets.

Which meant…

If she hadn’t known before—she would now.

And that made her the most dangerous Bellini of all.

“Let me handle her,” I said.

Alessandro turned to me, jaw tight.

“No. This is family.”

I reached for his hand. “Exactly. And family wounds you in ways enemies never could.”

We didn’t say more.

Because we both knew:

War was coming.

Alessandro

We drove back to the villa just before dawn.

It looked different.

Smaller.

Quieter.

Like it was holding its breath.

I stepped out of the car and scanned the perimeter. Two guards were missing. Another post is unmanned.

And then I saw it.

On the gate.

A single white rose.

Isabella came up behind me and froze when she saw it.

“No,” she whispered.

“What does it mean?”

She looked at me with wide, terrified eyes.

“It means Giada knows I’m pregnant.”

“And?”

“It means she’s declared blood feud.”

Isabella

The last time I saw a white rose on a doorstep was in Naples.

A girl named Claudia had tried to leave the family. She was sixteen. In love with a boy who sold poetry in the market.

They found her a week later.

Giada sent the rose.

Back then, I thought it was just a warning.

Now I knew better.

It was a countdown.

We didn’t sleep.

The villa turned into a fortress.

Doors reinforced.

Routes secured.

Weapons distributed.

But the most dangerous thing in that house wasn’t made of steel or fire.

It was true.

It sat between us like a loaded pistol.

And we were both waiting to see who would pull the trigger first.

Alessandro

I found Luca outside, near the east terrace.

He didn’t turn when I approached.

“She knows.”

“I figured.”

“Do you think she’ll come here?”

He nodded once.

“Not her. But her message will.”

I looked at him.

“What kind of message?”

He turned to me.

“One you can’t bury this time, Fratello.”

Isabella

That night, as I curled into Alessandro’s arms, I felt something shift.

Not outside.

Inside me.

The flutter.

The first movement.

The first proof was that the life inside me was real.

That we were still alive.

Still fighting.

And maybe—just maybe—still capable of winning.

Chapter Forty-Two: Alessandro & Isabella

Alessandro

I always knew it would come to this.

You don’t lead a family like mine without making enemies that remember your sins more clearly than your name.

But what I didn’t expect

Was the first blow to come from inside our home?

It was just past midnight when the alarms went off.

Not the outer sensors.

The interior breach alert.

Someone had entered the villa.

From beneath.

I grabbed my gun and moved silently down the hall. Luca and Matteo met me at the landing. Their eyes told me everything:

This wasn’t random.

This was orchestrated.

Isabella.

My pulse spiked. “Where is she?”

“She’s safe,” Matteo said. “For now.”

“Where?”

“Nursery wing. But Alessandro”

“What?”

“There’s blood in the study.”

I pushed past him.

The scent hit me before I opened the door.

Metallic. Sharp.

Someone had died here.

And on the wall

A message.

Written in blood.

“YOU CHOSE HER. NOW SHE WILL CHOOSE YOUR END.”

Below it

A single white feather.

Isabella

I woke up to screaming.

Not loud, but raw.

Like someone trying to silence their pain and failing miserably.

And then I felt it.

A cold shiver down my spine.

Not from fear.

From knowing.

She’d struck.

Giada.

And whoever she’d sent had gotten close.

Too close.

I pushed open the nursery door, where Matteo had insisted I rest, and saw Sofia — one of the maids — slumped on the floor.

Her throat slit.

A knife beside her.

And in the crib next to her…

A feather.

No baby.

Because there was no baby.

Not yet.

But it was a message all the same.

"Even your future bleeds."

Alessandro

I found her standing barefoot in the nursery, blood on her hands. Not hers. But it didn’t matter.

“Isabella”

“She was protecting me.”

I looked at Sofia’s body. At her hand, still outstretched toward the crib like she’d died reaching.

Isabella’s voice cracked. “I asked her to stay. Just in case. She didn’t deserve this.”

“No one in this house does.”

I moved to her slowly, deliberately, like approaching a wounded animal. “This is only the beginning.”

She didn’t answer.

Instead, she looked at me and said:

“Then let’s finish it.”

Isabella

Did they want a war?

They'd get it.

But not just guns and bullets.

I knew how Giada worked.

How she thought.

What she feared.

She didn’t fear Alessandro’s wrath.

She feared mine.

Because I wasn’t just his lover.

I was his future.

His anchor.

And now I was also his weapon.

“I want to lead the extraction team,” I told Luca.

He blinked. “You’re pregnant.”

“Exactly. That means I have more to lose than anyone in this house.”

He didn’t argue.

Because he saw it, too.

I wasn’t hiding anymore.

I was coming for her.

Chapter Forty-Three: Isabella

Some places haunt you.

Not because of what happened there, but because of what almost did.

Giada’s compound outside Lecce was one of those places for me.

I had been here before.

Years ago.

When I still answered to a name that no longer belonged to me.

The SUV rattled across the gravel road like a dying breath.

Alessandro was beside me, tense and coiled like a panther in a cage.

Luca drove. Matteo followed in the second vehicle with backup.

But this wasn’t their mission.

It was mine.

I had asked to lead it — demanded it, really — because I needed to see the end with my own eyes.

And because if this was a trap, only I could recognize the scent of it.

We stopped half a kilometer from the perimeter.

It hadn’t changed.

Same rusting gates. Same olive groves masking the surveillance poles. The same stench of power dressed in lace and stone.

But tonight, there were no guards.

No lights in the watchtower.

No dogs.

Just stillness.

I turned to Alessandro. “It’s too quiet.”

“Agreed.”

“Want to call it off?”

He met my eyes. “Do you?”

I didn’t answer.

Instead, I stepped out.

We entered through the north side, bypassing the front entirely. The door had been left unlocked — another warning, or maybe a dare.

Inside, candlelight flickered along the walls like ghosts trapped in stone.

And at the far end of the corridor

A table.

With wine.

Two glasses.

And her.

Giada.

Wearing all white, as if her sins could be bleached away with silk.

“I was wondering how long it would take you,” she said, rising.

Her voice was still soft, melodic.

But every note was wrapped in venom.

“Where is your army, Alessandro?”

He stayed behind me.

And I realized

He was letting me lead.

Just like I asked.

Good.

Because this wasn’t his reckoning.

It was mine.

“I didn’t bring an army,” I said. “Only a grave.”

She smiled. “How poetic. Still dramatic, I see.”

“And you’re still predictable.”

She laughed once, dry and hollow. “Isabella. You always thought you were different. But you’re just another girl who slept her way into a kingdom and thinks she can rule it.”

“I didn’t sleep my way anywhere.”

“Didn’t you?” Her eyes flicked to my stomach. “And now you think a child will protect you.”

I stepped forward. “No. But she’s the reason I’ll burn you to the ground if you ever come near her again.”

Alessandro hadn’t spoken.

He didn’t need to.

His silence was louder than any bullet.

But when Giada reached under the table, his gun was out in seconds.

She froze.

Then smiled again, this time less human.

“You think you can kill me?”

“No,” I said. “I think I already have.”

Because I knew her weakness.

Legacy.

Giada didn’t fear death.

She feared being forgotten.

Feared being buried in silence.

And so I gave her what she hated most:

Irrelevance.

“I recorded everything,” I said. “Your deals with Elio. The contracts on Bellini blood. It’s already in five vaults and one Vatican server.”

Her lips parted. “You wouldn’t”

“I would,” I whispered. “And I did.”

She screamed.

It wasn’t rage. It wasn’t fear.

It was a loss.

The loss of control.

Of leverage.

Of her illusion.

And then she lunged.

Gun in hand.

Straight for me.

I didn’t move.

Because Alessandro already had.

Three shots.

One in the shoulder.

One in the knee.

One dead center.

She fell forward.

But she wasn’t dead.

Not yet.

Just ruined.

The way I had once been.

I walked up to her slowly, crouched beside her, and whispered:

“You taught me how to survive. I thank you for that. Now you get to learn how it feels to lose everything.”

And I left her there.

Bleeding.

Alone.

Alessandro

She didn’t speak on the ride home.

I didn’t press her.

I could feel the storm behind her silence — the way the past had cracked open again, spilling old pain into new love.

But when we pulled up to the villa, she reached for my hand.

Not for comfort.

For grounding.

And I knew:

She was still standing.

Still fighting.

Still ours.

Chapter Forty-Four: Isabella

There was silence after the storm.

But not the peaceful kind.

This one felt heavy.

Like the air was holding its breath, waiting to see what would come next.

And so was I.

We'd taken down Giada.

Publicly.

News had spread faster than even I expected — whispers on the black market circuits, encrypted chatter through old Mafia channels. Her fall had become legend within days. But legends leave shadows.

And in those shadows, something else was growing.

A question.

Who would take her place?

I sat alone in the old Bellini war room, the oak table in front of me worn and stained from years of blood, cigars, and secrets.

The brothers had left me space.

All six of them respected Alessandro's silence when he said:

"Let her think."

I wasn't thinking.

I was feeling.

Remembering what Giada said.

What she almost took from me.

Not just my child.

But my name.

My voice.

My right to stand and lead beside him.

And for the first time in my life… I wasn't afraid of that power.

I wanted it.

A knock broke the stillness.

It was Luca.

He never knocked.

“You’re not alone anymore,” he said simply, and stepped aside.

Behind him

Alessandro.

He looked tired. Beautiful. Angry.

But also… proud.

He sat across from me.

“Matteo says we need to make a move on the southern ports. They were Giada’s last hold.”

“And you?”

“I’m waiting on your call.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Since when?”

“Since you walked out of that compound alive. Since you chose not to kill her. Since you didn’t need me to protect you — and still made I feel needed.”

I didn’t answer for a moment.

Then I said, “We take the ports. Quietly. Restructure. Offer the captains better rates. Loyalty bought through honor, not fear.”

He smiled.

“Look at you,” he murmured. “My little strategist.”

“I’m not yours, Alessandro.”

He leaned in, eyes gleaming.

“You’re right. You’re mine and theirs. La Donna del fuoco. The woman of fire.”

And suddenly I saw it.

What scared the rest of the world?

A woman who wasn’t a puppet.

Or a pawn.

Or a prize.

But a queen.

That night, the family gathered around the long table for the first time since Giada’s fall.

Each of the brothers sat quietly as I walked to the head of the room.

Alessandro stood, but didn’t speak.

I did.

“This family was built on blood, fear, and survival. But if it is to last—it must evolve.”

No one moved.

“You all taught me how to fight. But no one taught me how to be free. I learned that on my own.”

I looked at each of them.

“From this day forward, the Bellini name will not be ruled by tyranny. Not by tradition. But by strength, vision… and the future we build.”

Matteo raised a glass.

“To the fire.”

And the others followed.

But it was Alessandro’s voice that rang loudest.

“To Isabella Bellini.”

Alessandro

That night, I watched her sleep.

Not because I was afraid she’d disappear.

But because I wanted to remember her just like this.

Strong. Alive.

Ours.

She had survived her past.

Claimed her future.

And now…

She was building something greater than any of us had ever imagined.

Not just a legacy.

A new empire.

And I would follow her into hell, if that’s where she chose to lead.

Because she had already dragged me out of it.

Chapter Forty-Five: Alessandro

There’s a difference between silence and stillness.

Silence is absence.

Stillness is waiting.

And tonight, the air in the Bellini estate was still.

Too still.

I stood on the balcony of my study, watching the lights of the port flicker in the distance. We’d taken it two days ago without a shot fired. Just paperwork, favors, and a whispered threat behind every smile.

Exactly as Isabella planned.

She was downstairs now — in the archives with Matteo and Luca — sorting through the data Giada left behind. Files. Contacts. Payment trails. Some of it is ancient. Some of it was dangerous. All of it is valuable.

And all of it is a target.

The first sign came in the form of silence.

Our Lisbon contacts stopped responding.

Then the Rotterdam warehouse was torched.

No casualties.

Just a message.

“You’ve grown too fast.”

The words came burned into a Bellini shipping crate.

That night, I called an emergency council — something we hadn’t done since my father’s death. The brothers came, tired but alert, and Isabella walked in last.

Wearing black.

Not as mourning.

As armor.

“I think we underestimated who else wanted Giada out of the picture,” she said without sitting.

Matteo nodded. “The De Rossi family’s been quiet. Too quiet.”

“Not just them,” I added. “Interpol intercepted a weapons container in Marseille. One of ours. The kind that doesn’t officially exist.”

Luca leaned forward. “Someone is tipping them off.”

A leak.

Or a traitor.

The table went quiet. And for a moment, I looked around and felt the weight of everything we’d tried to rebuild.

The empire. The trust. The family.

Was it all still too fragile?

And then Isabella spoke.

“We cut the branches to save the tree. But what if the rot’s in the roots?”

All eyes turned to her.

She continued.

“I want names. I want financial trials. I want to know who benefited from Giada’s fall beside us.”

“Do you think it’s internal?” Luca asked.

She didn’t blink.

“I know it is.”

That night, we barely slept.

I could feel her thoughts even in the dark — spinning, snapping into place, rearranging the pieces of a puzzle she hadn’t yet seen clearly.

At 4:17 a.m., she sat up suddenly.

“What if it’s not the De Rossi family?”

I rubbed my eyes. “Then who?”

She turned to me.

“Elio’s widow.”

My stomach dropped.

She’d vanished months ago. No trace. No movement. No retaliation after her husband was executed by Giada’s order.

We thought she was gone.

We were wrong.

Isabella rose and began pacing.

“Think about it. She disappears when Giada rises. She resurfaces the day after her fall. The warehouse. The messages. All of it... timed.”

“And her motive?”

“She doesn’t want revenge.”

She turned, eyes sharp as knives.

“She wants power.”

Later that morning, Isabella called a meeting. But this time, it was only the women of the Bellini network wives, daughters, and allies who had been sidelined too long.

“Giada used you as ornaments,” she said to them. “I want you to be weapons.”

One of the older women — Sofia, Matteo’s aunt — looked skeptical. “And what if the men don’t like that?”

Isabella’s smile was cold.

“Then we remind them whose blood they bled for in Sicily. And who pulled them from the ashes.”

And just like that, the tone of the family shifted.

Not toward war.

But toward strategy.

As the sun rose over Puglia, I looked at her and saw the truth I’d ignored for too long.

She wasn’t beside me anymore.

She was ahead of me.

And maybe that was exactly where she needed to be.

Chapter Forty-Six: Isabella

Trust is a weapon.

Sharp when forged properly.

Fatal when cracked.

I used to think love made you vulnerable.

But now I know

It makes you ruthless.

Especially when the person you love is a target.

The information came in just after dawn.

An encrypted message routed through three dark web servers masked in a code the old Bellini don used for clandestine operations in the 80s. Only four people alive knew how to read it.

I was one of them.

"La vedova si e svegliata. The widow is awake."

I took the message straight to the vault.

In the Bellini archives, the vault isn't for money.

It's for secrets.

Behind six inches of steel and decades of blood was a single shelf, locked in a custom case — the Legacy Files.

My father kept them.

Giada tried to destroy them.

I preserved them.

And today, they were finally going to speak.

The widow — her name was Marcella De Vito.

Once the silent wife of Elio, Giada's most feared enforcer. She'd grown up in the old Neapolitan clans, trained by her mother in poisons, negotiation, and silence. Not many knew she existed.

Even fewer survived meeting her.

According to the Legacy Files, she disappeared after Elio’s death. But the notes from a retired consigliere suggested she had ties beyond Italy — deep ties.

To South American cartels.

To Eastern arms dealers.

To a faction in the old Bratva.

And now… she was back.

And if I was right, she didn’t want to destroy the Bellini family.

She wanted to replace it.

Alessandro

Marseille smelled like salt, fire, and betrayal.

We arrived under cover of fog — three ships, two decoys, and a convoy of trusted men. Matteo stayed behind. I needed him to keep the family stable while I handled the French front.

But already, I could feel the cracks.

Our dock master was late.

Our containers had been moved.

And a shadow followed us from the marina.

“I don’t like this,” Luca muttered, scanning the horizon with one hand on his pistol.

“I don’t either,” I said.

But I didn’t stop walking.

Because stopping meant fear.

And fear meant weakness.

And weakness got you killed.

Inside the warehouse, the lights flickered.

Two men waited. French. Polished suits. Clean shoes.

Too clean.

They smiled.

“You’re late,” one of them said in perfect Italian.

“I don’t answer to middlemen,” I replied.

“Then you’ll answer to her.”

He tossed a burner phone at my feet.

The screen lit up instantly. A video call. Scrambled ID. But I knew the voice before the screen even blinked on.

“Caro Alessandro,” purred a woman’s voice. “How good to see you again.”

It was Marcella.

Her hair was darker now. Her face is older. Colder. But the smile — that smile could cut steel.

“You’re playing a dangerous game,” I said.

“I’m not playing,” she replied. “I’m reclaiming.”

The signal cut.

Ten minutes later, a bomb exploded in our backup convoy.

No casualties — just fire. Warning.

We were being watched. Surrounded. Hunted.

Marcella wasn’t making deals.

She was sending messages.

And she was better at this than I remembered.

That night, I called Isabella.

Her voice was calm. Steady.

But I heard the weight behind it.

“She’s out in the open,” I said.

“I know. I read her ledger.”

“She’s building something.”

“So are we.”

A pause.

Then she added, “Come home. We’ll face her together.”

And for once, I didn’t argue.

Because this war — our war — had just changed.

It wasn’t about control anymore. It was about survival.

Chapter Forty-Seven: Isabella

Power isn’t always about force.

Sometimes it’s about foresight.

I’d spent days following financial trails, false leads, encrypted messages hidden in antique books, and all of them… pointed to one moment.

A strike.

But I never expected it to come from inside.

It started with a missed call from Luca.

Then silence.

No text.

No reply.

I waited five minutes. Then ten.

I called again. Straight to voicemail.

Something was wrong.

“Enzo,” I barked into the comm line. “Find my brother-in-law. Now.”

He didn’t ask questions. He just moved.

Minutes later, we had surveillance footage from the port.

Luca’s car.

A black SUV blocks him.

Two men.

Fast, precise.

Luca fought — of course, he did — but they were prepared.

Too prepared.

They injected something. Dragged him into the SUV.

Gone in 46 seconds.

I slammed the folder shut on my desk.

Alessandro hadn’t even made it home yet. He was in the air, mid-flight, unreachable.

This wasn’t just a message.

This was an escalation.

I turned to Giulia — my most trusted informant.

“Tell the others. Activate the Contessa Circle.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

“All of them?”

“All. If Marcella wants war — she can have it. But this time… it will come wearing heels and pearls.”

The Contessa Circle was something I created quietly while rebuilding the Bellini network.

It was composed of women — wives, daughters, widows of former mafia leaders — underestimated, overlooked, but never useless.

They had access.

They knew.

And now, they had a target.

Marcella De Vito.

That night, we met in the crypt beneath the chapel.

A dozen women in silence, seated in candlelight.

Giulia opened the meeting.

“Marcella has taken Luca Bellini. We believe she intends to use him as leverage.”

A murmur.

I stood, letting the weight of my words carry through centuries of stone and memory.

“She’s using our loyalty against us. Our love. But she doesn’t understand one thing”

I scanned the faces before me.

“Love doesn’t make us weak. It makes us lethal.”

Alessandro

I landed at dusk.

The second my feet hit the tarmac, Matteo was waiting.

“She has him,” he said. “Marcella.”

I didn’t blink.

“Where?”

“We’re narrowing it down. But she made contact.”

He handed me a phone.

A single video file waited.

I played it.

Luca. Strapped to a chair. Blood on his temple. Conscious, but barely.

And her voice.

Marcella.

“I want Isabella,” she said. “At the old theater in Naples. Alone. Midnight.”

The screen went black.

“No,” I growled. “No way in hell.”

But Isabella was already walking into the war room when I said it.

“I’m going,” she said simply.

“You’re not. She’ll kill you.”

“She won’t,” Isabella replied, voice calm. “She needs me. She wants to humiliate me. She wants a spectacle.”

“So let me be your weapon.”

She turned to face me.

“No, Alessandro. This time… I have to face her. Woman to woman. Queen to queen.”

She stepped close and cupped my face in her palms.

“You once told me you loved me not for my fire, but for the way I never let it burn uncontrolled.”

I nodded slowly.

“Let me finish this,” she whispered. “For your brother. For us.”

That night, as she prepared to leave for Naples, I stood in the shadows and watched her braid her hair, holster a knife under her silk coat, and kiss the locket she wore — the one with our sonogram inside.

She hadn’t told anyone yet.

Not even me.

But at that moment, I knew.

And I swore…

If Marcella laid a hand on her, I would burn the world to find the ashes of her soul.

Chapter Forty-Eight: Isabella

The old theater in Naples still reeked of ghosts.

Of velvet curtains that once dripped with gold.

Of broken applause that never quite faded.

Of blood that never really dried beneath the boards.

It was a fitting place for Marcella to make her move.

A stage for queens.

And for executions.

I arrived precisely at midnight.

No security. No backup.

Just me.

And the blade strapped to the inside of my thigh.

I walked through the shattered lobby — marble cracked, chandeliers shattered. Someone had lit candles along the aisle, like an ancient altar.

She wanted drama.

I would give her war.

She waited on the stage, sitting on an old throne from some forgotten opera.

Marcella De Vito.

She looked different than I remembered — less ghost, more general. Her silver hair was pulled into a tight knot. Her coat was blood-red. And in her hand?

A glass of Chianti.

“Welcome, Bella Bellini,” she purred.

“I’m not here to talk,” I said, stepping closer.

“You will,” she smiled. “You always did love a monologue.”

She stood slowly, circling me like a snake.

“You’re impressive, I’ll give you that. Raised by a man who never trusted you. Married into a family that needed you silent. And yet… here you are. Queen of rubble.”

I didn’t flinch.

“You kidnapped my brother-in-law.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “He’s fine. I needed a piece to get you to the board. You’re here now. Shall we play?”

She gestured behind her.

A curtain dropped.

Luca sat bound in a steel chair. Alive. Conscious. But pale.

“You brought him here?” I asked.

“Insurance,” Marcella said. “He dies if you lie to me.”

I stepped forward, voice ice.

“Then ask your question.”

Marcella tilted her head. “Why are you really here, Isabella? Not just tonight. In this world. This life. This war.”

I blinked.

She didn’t want information.

She wanted understanding.

So I gave her truth.

“Because I was born into a cage. And I spent half my life learning to build keys out of bone.”

She paused.

Then, quietly, she said, “So was I.”

And in that moment, I saw her — not the monster, not the myth, but the woman beneath the warpaint. The one who had been used. Betrayed. Rewritten.

Just like me.

But where I had chosen to love…

She had chosen to burn.

“You think you’re different than me,” Marcella said softly.

“I know I am,” I answered.

She smiled — not cruelly, but almost with pity.

“I used to think love was salvation too. Until it became my noose.”

Then she stepped closer. Whispered.

“If Alessandro dies, it will be your fault.”

I didn’t hesitate.

I punched her across the face.

She stumbled back — shocked — but laughing.

“Oh, Isabella,” she said, blood in her mouth. “There is a fire in you.”

“I buried queens with less venom,” I growled.

She nodded, almost respectfully.

“Then let’s see how far you’ll go to protect your kingdom.”

She snapped her fingers.

Two men dragged Luca off the stage.

And then the curtain dropped again.

Behind it: a screen. Live footage.

Of our villa. Of Alessandro.

And a sniper on the roof.

Alessandro

I saw the red dot before I saw the shooter.

Isabella’s voice screamed through the encrypted comm in my ear. “DOWN!”

I dropped.

The bullet shattered the window behind me.

Giulia returned fire from the balcony. Matteo tackled the snipers second to the ground.

Chaos. Smoke. Screams.

But I had only one thought: She’s watching us.

And this… this wasn’t her endgame.

This was her opening act.

Chapter Forty-Nine: Alessandro

The smoke hadn’t even cleared when I felt it

Betrayal.

Not the kind that comes from enemies.

The kind that wears your crest.

The kind that shares your blood.

Someone had opened the gate.

Someone had disabled the west camera.

Someone had handed Marcella De Vito a map of our villa.

“Status,” I barked into my earpiece as I moved through the hallway, gun drawn.

“Sniper is dead,” Giulia answered. “The second’s in custody.”

“Matteo?”

“Wounded. Arm. He’ll live.”

“Isabella?”

“She’s en route. ETA twelve minutes.”

I stopped in front of the security room.

Four men were there. All Bellini. All supposedly loyal.

I stared each of them down.

“Lock the door.”

I reviewed the logs. One screen blinked.

It wasn’t a glitch.

It was a loop. A 14-second video of an empty corridor played over and over.

Someone inside this room had uploaded it.

I turned.

“Which of you was on shift two hours ago?”

Three hands went up.

The fourth didn’t move.

Lorenzo.

My cousin.

Brown eyes. Calm. Too calm.

“I wasn’t on duty,” he said, “I was with Carlo”

“Carlo’s in Rome.”

Silence.

I took two steps forward.

“Where were you really?”

He hesitated for half a second.

That’s all I needed.

I slammed him against the wall, gun at his jaw.

“Who paid you?”

“Don’t—Alessandro, it’s not what you think”

I pressed harder. “Who. Paid. You.”

Then he whispered something that made the room go still:

“I wasn’t paid.”

That hit harder than a confession.

Because it meant loyalty wasn’t the reason.

Ideology was.

He looked me in the eye and said:

“You’ve made the Bellinis soft. You let her—Isabella—run us like a corporation. You think love makes us stronger. But it makes us slow. Marcella sees what this world really needs. She’s ruthless. She’s clean.”

I stepped back. Disgust crawling through my bones.

“You sold your soul for an illusion of strength.”

“I chose survival.”

“You chose extinction.”

And then

I pulled the trigger.

Not because I wanted to.

But because in our world, a traitor breathes only once.

Later, I stood at the family graveyard. Not for Lorenzo.

For the memory of peace I once believed we could build without blood.

Isabella arrived, silent.

No words.

She just slid her hand into mine.

I looked at her, the weight of our future burning between us.

“We have moles,” I said.

She nodded. “And ghosts.”

“But ghosts don’t bleed,” I whispered. “Traitors do.”

That night, we held council. Just us, the brothers, and Isabella.

Dario, the second-born, slammed his glass down. “How deep is this?”

“Deep,” I said. “Marcella’s been planting seeds for years. She’s waited for a fracture.”

Santino leaned forward. “We give her war?”

“No,” Isabella said. “We give her doubt. We make her question every one of her soldiers. And then—when she turns her back—we strike.”

One by one, the Bellinis nodded.

Six brothers.

One wife.

And a mission that now had a face.

Not just vengeance.

Cleansing.

Chapter Fifty: Isabella

I wore poison like perfume.

A silk dress, cut at the thigh.

Emerald earrings sharp enough to slice skin.

And a smile that had buried men.

Tonight, I was no wife. No daughter. No pawn.

I was a weapon.

The Contessa Circle was meeting in Venice — masked, anonymous, and deadly.

It wasn't just a social club. It was a web of power spun across Europe's underworld, bound not by blood but by blackmail, ambition, and silence.

I had taken it from Marcella once.

Tonight, I would use it to unravel her.

The meeting took place in a crumbling palazzo lit only by candlelight and secrets.

Each woman wore a mask. Each had her place — the Forger, the Widow, the Vulture, the Whisper.

And then there was La Serpe.

She arrived last. A red velvet mask, serpent motif curling along her cheek.

Her voice? Like acid in champagne.

"I hear Marcella wants your head."

I didn't flinch. "She'll have to climb over my crown to get it."

Laughter, brittle and sharp, rang through the chamber.

La Serpe stepped closer.

"She sent an offer to half the Circle. Gold. Freedom. Blood."

"And did you take it?" I asked.

She didn't answer. She just poured wine.

And then said: "The Circle will fracture, Isabella. Unless someone bleeds."

I let silence stretch, let tension wind around their throats.

Then I spoke.

“I know Marcella. She feeds on loyalty like a parasite. She devours until there is nothing left.”

A pause. Then I dropped the first truth.

“She’s using Bellini men as bait. Inside my home. In my bed. Some of you helped plant them.”

Gasps. A few eyes flicked to the Vulture.

Good. Fear made people sloppy. I leaned in.

“You don’t have to choose sides,” I whispered, “only odds. And I never gamble unless I know I’ll win.”

La Serpe smiled, slow and cruel.

“You want my loyalty?”

“No. I want your silence,” I replied. “Until I slit her throat.”

The room froze. Then…

The Widow raised her glass.

“To the future Queen of Ashes.”

After the meeting, La Serpe followed me to the canal.

“You remind me of her,” she said.

“I’m nothing like her.”

“Not yet,” she whispered. “But vengeance… is a slow possession.”

I turned, stepped so close our breath mingled.

“If I become her, stop me.”

La Serpe nodded once. “I’d enjoy that.”

Later that night, back in our villa, I found Alessandro in the library.

He was reading. But his hands were clenched too tightly around the book.

“News?” he asked.

I sat beside him, leaned my head on his shoulder.

“The Circle is mine. For now.”

“And La Serpe?”

“A maybe. A dangerous one.”

He turned to me, his eyes softer than they should’ve been.

“You scare me sometimes.”

I smiled. “Good. That means I’m still sharp.”

“But I love you more,” he said.

I closed my eyes and let that be enough — for tonight.

Chapter Fifty-One: Alessandro

Rome was a city of ghosts.

Some haunted ruins. Others haunted memory.

But tonight, I hunted one that breathed.

The White Viper.

The name had surfaced twice in a single week — whispered by dying men, encrypted in messages hidden behind aliases only insiders used.

The White Viper wasn’t a myth in our world.

She was a relic. A shadow. A symbol of death wrapped in silk and cyanide.

Once, she ran Marcella's assassinations in Istanbul, London, and Tangier.

Then she vanished.

And now…

She was back.

I met my informant near the Tiber, just as the bells struck midnight.

He was a coward — hunched, jittery, always looking over his shoulder.

“She’s meeting someone,” he said. “Tonight. A deal.”

“Where?”

He hesitated. “An old wine cellar. Beneath the church of San Gregorio.”

I gave him a roll of cash.

And then snapped his neck.

Not out of cruelty.

But because I knew his kind.

If I didn’t kill him, someone else would — and they’d make him talk.

The cellar was damp and rotting, lined with aging barrels and rusted chains.

I hid in the shadows.

Two figures entered.

One was tall, male, clearly armed.

The other… her.

White trench coat.

Long silver-blonde hair coiled like a snake.

She removed her gloves delicately, as if undressing a corpse.

I recognized her instantly.

Luciana Volkov.

Former KGB. Current ghost.

And once…

My lover.

She hadn’t changed. Not really.

Still moved like a dancer. Still kissed like a knife.

She leaned close to the man beside her.

“You tell Marcella the shipment is delayed,” she said in flawless Italian. “But the poison? That’s already in their system.”

The man handed her a folder.

I stepped out of the dark.

“Luciana.”

She didn’t flinch.

She just turned, smiled.

“Alessandro. Darling.”

I raised my gun.

She raised her hands.

“Still so quick to aim. Haven’t we danced this dance before?”

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“You mean alive?”

“I mean breathing my air.”

She stepped closer.

“I came for one reason. To warn you.”

“Of what?”

“Marcella has a child. A son.”

That stopped me.

“No, she doesn’t.”

“She does. And she’s training him to kill you.”

The silence between us was deafening.

Then she tossed the folder at my feet.

“Proof.”

I opened it.

Photos. A boy — maybe eleven. Sharp eyes. Cold posture.

My blood ran cold.

“He’s yours,” she said.

I froze.

“What?”

Her smile turned cruel. “Did you really think you were her only obsession?”

I felt the walls closing in.

Luciana whispered, “Kill Marcella, and he becomes yours. Spare her… and he’ll become you.”

I turned, leaving her in the dark.

But the truth followed me.

Because whether it was real or a trap, I now had a new question burning in my mind:

What if my greatest enemy… is my own son?

Chapter Fifty-Two: Isabella

The letter came with no return address.

Just a white envelope, tucked beneath my pillow.

No one saw who placed it there. No security footage. No scent. No sound.

Just fear.

I opened it alone, at my vanity.

Inside was a photo of a boy-dark hair, pale skin, sharp eyes that didn't match his age.

No smile.

No innocence.

Just cold calculation.

And under the photo, one line handwritten in delicate cursive:

"Protect him. Or lose everything."

I stared at it for a long time.

He couldn't have been older than eleven. But his posture was military. His eyes - familiar.

And it hit me

He looked like Alessandro.

Not just the jawline or the lips.

The rage in the stillness.

I tucked the letter inside my robe pocket and walked to the terrace.

Rome glowed below like molten gold.

Alessandro stood at the edge, arms braced on the railing, the weight of secrets pressing against his spine.

"I saw her," he said without turning. "Luciana Volkov."

My breath caught.

"The White Viper?"

He nodded once. "She gave me something. A lie. Or a bomb. I don't know which."

I stepped beside him. Silent.

Then he turned to me - and I saw it in his face.

Shame.

Fear.

A question he didn't want to ask.

"She says Marcella has a son. My son."

I didn't flinch.

I just reached into my robe and handed him the photo.

He took it. Stared. His hands trembled.

"She knows how to twist truth," I said. "Even with children."

"But what if it's real?" he whispered. "What if I have blood out there I never knew about? Raised to kill me?”

I looked at him, this man who ruled empires and buried brothers.

And I said, quietly:

"Then we save him. Before he becomes her."

That night I called the Contessa Circle again - private channel, encrypted, only accessed through biometric code and an oath sworn in blood.

"La Serpe," I said when her masked face appeared, "Marcella has a child. Possibly Alessandro's. Find him."

She was silent for a moment. Then asked:

"If he's real... what do you want done?"

"Bring him to me."

Alive.

Unharmed.

"Even if he tries to kill you?"

"Especially then," I said.

Because I didn't just want to save Alessandro.

I wanted to save that boy from becoming what Marcella was grooming him to be - a monster made of betrayal and vengeance.

The next day, I met with the youngest of the Bellini brothers, Luca.

He was good with tech, terrible with emotions.

"Find every trace of Marcella's movements in the last twelve years," I told him.

He frowned. "That's... a lot."

"Then start with Istanbul. Geneva. Cairo."

"Why those?"

"Because they're places she liked to bleed people slowly."

That night I sat in our bedroom, watching Alessandro sleep.

He looked so still. So quiet.

But I knew war burned behind his eyelids.

Not with guns.

With truths.

I reached over and touched his chest, right above his heart.

"I'll find him," I whispered.

"I'll find him before Marcella turns him into something neither of us can love."

And if I couldn't?

Then I'd do the unthinkable.

Because sometimes the greatest mercy…

Is stopping a curse before it can take root.

Chapter Fifty-Three: Alessandro

Some cities welcomed you like a lover.

Paris… greeted me like an ex.

Elegant, cruel, and full of reminders I didn’t want.

I arrived alone, despite Isabella’s protests.

No guards. No backup.

Only a Glock strapped under my jacket, and a promise I wasn’t sure I could keep.

I had come for the truth.

But part of me feared it already lived inside me.

The apartment on Rue Saint-Antoine was untouched by time.

Golden mirrors. Marble fireplace. Dust on everything but the floor.

I had rented this flat for Luciana once, years ago. When we were younger. Hungrier. Less haunted.

Now it reeked of memories I couldn’t kill.

She was waiting.

Wearing white, like a challenge.

“You came,” she said, her voice low, almost fond.

“I want answers.”

She gestured to the velvet chair across from her.

“Then sit. And prepare to hate me.”

I didn’t sit.

“You said Marcella has a son. My son.”

She nodded slowly. “I didn’t lie.”

“Then where is he?”

“Hidden.”

“By whom?”

She smiled faintly. “By me.”

Rage clawed through me.

“You hid him?”

“Would you have raised him, Alessandro? As a soldier? As a shield? Or would you have used him — like your father used you?”

I flinched.

She knew where to cut.

“I would’ve protected him.”

“Like you protected me?” she said. “Like you protected Matteo?”

The name of my dead brother — stabbed in Naples when I was twenty-two — hit me like a bullet.

“You don’t get to say his name.”

“I do,” she whispered. “Because Marcella ordered his death. And I tried to stop it.”

Silence crushed the room.

I finally sat.

She poured two glasses of wine. Didn’t wait for me to drink.

“He’s eleven. Speaks four languages. Shoots like a prodigy. He doesn’t know who you are.”

My throat tightened. “What does he think?”

“That Marcella saved him. That you abandoned him.”

I closed my eyes.

Of course she did.

She didn’t just want my empire.

She wanted my legacy.

“Why tell me now?” I asked.

Luciana looked down.

“Because she’s moving him to Palermo. To finish his training. After that, he won’t just be a son.”

“He’ll be a killer.”

She nodded. “And she’ll aim him at you.”

I stood.

“If you’re telling the truth”

“I am.”

“Then give me his name.”

She reached into a drawer, pulled out a simple piece of paper.

I took it. A name. A location. A birthdate.

He was born three weeks before Marcella vanished from Istanbul.

I had been there.

So had she. So had Luciana.

“You knew this whole time,” I whispered. “And you never told me.”

“I was protecting you,” she said. “From becoming the kind of man who weaponized his own child.”

I clenched the paper so tightly it tore.

“I already am that kind of man.”

Luciana stood and stepped closer.

“He has your fire. Your fury. But not your restraint. If Marcella turns him loose, Alessandro…”

“He’ll kill me.”

“No,” she said. “He’ll destroy everything you built. Including Isabella.”

At that name, something broke in me.

“She’s stronger than any of us.”

Luciana looked at me for a long time. Then said:

“Then she’ll have to prove it.”

As I left, she whispered one last thing:

“You’ll find him in Prague.

But be warned… he’s not looking for a father.

He’s hunting a name.”

That night, I sent a message to Isabella.

Three words:

I found him.

Her reply was instant.

Then bring him home. Or burn the world trying.

Chapter Fifty-Four: Isabella

The villa hadn't felt this quiet since the war with the Mancinis.

Not silent—just... holding its breath.

Every servant walked softer. Every hallway echoed longer. Even the wind outside the olive trees moved with hesitation.

They all knew something was coming.

Someone.

I stood in the nursery I had never finished.

It was supposed to be for our future child — the one Alessandro and I would create out of love, not legacy.

But now… that vision blurred.

Instead of soft blankets and lullabies, I saw shadows and strategy.

Because the boy Alessandro was bringing home wasn’t born of love.

He was born of deception.

Raised in revenge.

And carried Bellini blood in hands that might one day point a gun at my husband’s chest.

I ran my fingers over the crib’s edge, tracing the carved laurel leaves.

“This will not be a prison,” I whispered.

Not for him.

Not for me.

Gianna entered the room quietly, carrying a tray with tea and documents.

“The security perimeter’s been doubled,” she said. “Luca added facial tracking to the east gate. No movement yet from Marcella’s men.”

I nodded, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

“What if he hates us?” I asked.

Gianna blinked. “The boy?”

I nodded.

She placed the tray down, then crossed her arms — always the soldier first, woman second.

“Then let him hate us. We’ll teach him to live anyway.”

I almost smiled.

But then I looked at the envelope in my hand — the one Alessandro had sent before boarding the jet to Prague.

Inside was the boy’s name:

Emilio Volkov Bellini.

He carried both names like poison in a chalice.

Volkov — a bloodline of spies, poisoners, mercenaries.

Bellini — a house of iron and loyalty, stained with decades of war.

He was a child, yes.

But he was also a battleground.

That night I met with Adriano, the second-oldest Bellini brother.

The quietest. The most lethal.

“He’ll need discipline,” he said. “And a leash.”

“He’s not a dog.”

“He’s not a son either. Not yet.”

I didn’t respond.

Because he was right.

And I hated it.

I went to the chapel after midnight.

Not to pray.

To think.

The fresco on the ceiling—Our Lady of Sorrows—stared down at me, her eyes full of agony and patience.

Like every woman who’s ever loved a dangerous man.

I whispered aloud, “Don’t make me choose between saving him… and protecting Alessandro.”

My voice echoed through the marble like an oath.

Because deep down, I knew:

The day may come when Emilio would force my hand.

And when that moment arrived…

I would bleed for the boy.

But I would kill for my husband.

The next morning, I stood on the villa’s main balcony as the private jet landed on the far lawn.

Luca beside me. Gianna behind.

The sun was barely rising.

And in that gold light, I saw Alessandro step down from the plane.

Then

A boy followed.

Slender frame. Stiff posture. A bag slung over one shoulder like a weapon.

His eyes scanned the grounds with clinical detachment.

No curiosity. No fear.

Just calculation.

He looked twelve going on thirty.

And when his gaze reached me

He paused.

Not in awe.

In judgment.

As if assessing whether I was weak. Or worthy.

“Your move, Isabella,” I murmured.

Then descended the steps to meet the son of my enemy…

…and perhaps the heir of my heart.

Chapter Fifty-Five: Emilio

I don’t believe in family.

Family is a leash.

A lie people tell you so they can own you, shape you.

I was shaped by fire and silence.

And by her.

Marcella.

She never said she loved me. Not once.

But she made sure I could gut a man by ten.

Break a lie detector by eleven.

And by twelve… I was fluent in three dialects of murder.

She told me my father abandoned me.

Left me in her hands because I was inconvenient.

A mistake.

But now I was here — standing in the land of ghosts and gold.

The Bellini estate.

Italy.

Enemy territory.

I hated how beautiful it was.

The stone walls soaked in history. The olive trees older than any name I’d been given. The scent of blood masked by lavender and citrus.

This was the empire I was supposed to inherit.

Or destroy.

Maybe both.

She stood at the base of the stairs.

The woman.

Tall. Composed. Chestnut hair swept into something elegant, like she was ready to host royalty or burn down a kingdom

Isabella Bellini, they said her name was.

My father’s wife.

Not my mother. But not an enemy either.

Not yet.

I studied her the way I was taught.

No weapon visible.

No jewelry except a thin ring — platinum. Worn often.

Shoes expensive but practical.

She didn’t reach for me. Didn’t speak first.

Smart.

That meant I had to.

So I asked, “Are you the queen here?”

She blinked. “Do I look like one?”

“You look like you’ve never been told no.”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“I have. But only once. And I corrected the mistake.”

I nodded once. “Good answer.”

She didn’t flinch.

Most people flinch around boys like me.

We see too much.

We say too little.

Then he stepped forward.

Him.

The man I’d seen in three blurry photos.

Alessandro Bellini.

My father.

He didn’t smile.

Didn’t open his arms.

He just stood there like a wall.

Solid.

Unshaken.

Unapologetic.

I respected that.

But I didn’t trust it.

“You’re taller than I expected,” he said.

“You’re older.”

His lips twitched. “Fair enough.”

I turned back to Isabella.

“I don’t like being lied to.”

“Neither do I,” she replied.

“Then don’t start.”

Her gaze sharpened.

And something passed between us.

Not affection.

Not connection.

An understanding.

A deal without words.

That night they gave me my own wing.

My own room.

Books in four languages.

A punching bag.

A locked cabinet with a rifle inside and a code I hadn’t cracked yet.

Nice touch.

But I knew the walls had ears.

The cameras were hidden but not well.

Luca — the head of security — wanted me to see them.

Let the boy feel watched.

Let him feel small.

They had no idea.

I sat on the balcony after midnight.

The stars above me looked different than in Moscow.

Less sharp. More blurred.

The wind smelled like wine and war.

Alessandro came out, leaning against the rail beside me.

Neither of us said anything for a while.

Then he asked, “What do you know about me?”

“Only what she told me.”

“And what’s that?”

“That you left us. That you wanted a kingdom more than a son.”

He nodded slowly

“I won’t lie to you,” he said. “There are parts of that story that are true.”

“And the rest?”

He turned to me.

“They’ll be yours to decide.”

I didn’t answer.

Because I wasn’t ready to forgive.

But I didn’t want revenge either.

Not yet.

I just wanted truth.

And maybe… something else.

Something dangerous.

Something that felt like home.

Chapter Fifty-Six: Alessandro

He had my eyes.

Not just the color.

The weight behind them.

That unreadable stare that makes men flinch before you speak.

Marcella had turned him into a mirror of my worst instincts. And somehow... that terrified me more than any enemy I'd faced.

He sat across the long dining table the next morning. Straight spine. Hands resting on the edge of the table, not on his lap — an old assassin's posture. Eyes on me, calculating.

I saw twelve years of damage in his silence.

And I couldn't find the words to cut through it.

So I didn't try.

Not yet.

"Do you trust him?" Luca asked me quietly after breakfast, once Emilio had vanished into the courtyard with a book on military strategy—his own choice.

"No," I said.

"Then why bring him here?"

I glanced at my brother.

"Because if I left him there, he'd grow into a weapon aimed at my heart."

Luca grunted. "And now?"

"Now, at least I know where the blade is."

He didn't ask for anything.

Didn’t flinch when Adriano challenged him to spar.

Didn’t blink when Isabella looked at him like he was a ghost she might learn to love.

That night, I watched him on the training mat, circling Gianna, light on his feet like a boxer trained in Siberian frost. He moved like a survivor.

Not a boy.

And when Gianna pinned him with a sweep of her leg, he didn’t pout or protest.

He studied her technique. Nodded. Tried again.

And the second time, he won.

Gianna stood, shook her head.

“Either that kid’s a genius,” she muttered to me, “or we’re all in trouble.”

“Both,” I said.

I sat with Isabella by the fireplace after midnight. Her hands wrapped around a glass of wine, her eyes lost in the flames.

“He doesn’t trust me,” I murmured.

“Should he?”

That stung. Because it was honest.

“I didn’t know he existed,” I said.

“I know.” She looked at me then. Really looked. “But he doesn’t.”

“He’s twelve. He’s a boy.”

“No,” she said softly. “He’s not.”

And I knew what she meant.

Marcella raised him like a blade.

Not a son.

“Do you want to love him?” she asked.

I blinked.

It wasn’t can you.

It was do you want to.

I let the silence stretch between us like wire.

Then: “Yes.”

“Then stop trying to make him a Bellini.”

“What else would I make him?”

Her voice was low.

“A child. First.”

Later that night, I went to his wing.

He was awake, sitting at the desk, sketching a floor plan of the villa.

I said nothing.

Just stood in the doorway.

“You changed the east security grid yesterday,” he said without looking up.

I arched a brow. “How do you know that?”

“There’s a new camera reflection in the second-floor guest window. Lens distortion.”

I exhaled slowly.

Then stepped inside and sat across from him.

“You want to know what I regret most.” I asked.

He looked up.

I saw the hesitation in his eyes.

The curiosity.

He wouldn’t say yes.

But he was listening.

“That I didn’t fight harder to know the truth.”

He said nothing.

So I stood.

As I reached the door, his voice stopped me.

“What would you have done if I wanted to kill you?”

I turned slowly.

“Waited for you to try.”

“And then?”

“I’d let you decide what kind of man you want to be.”

He stared at me.

And in that single second…

…I saw the war inside him flicker.

It wasn’t over.

But something shifted.

Not peace.

Not yet.

But maybe…

A truce.

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Isabella

It started with silence.

Not the gentle kind that settles between people who love each other.

The kind that simmers like a knife pressed beneath the skin.

The kind that comes after betrayal or before war.

Dinner was quiet. Too quiet.

Adriano’s fork scraped his plate.

Gianna didn’t even look at her food.

Matteo, the youngest, stared at Emilio with the intensity of a wolf circling something small and untested.

Only Alessandro pretended not to notice.

He was good at pretending.

But I wasn’t.

I saw it. Felt it. Every unspoken word.

He doesn’t belong here.

He’s not one of us.

He’s a threat.

And worst of all…

He might replace us.

When Emilio stood to leave, no one stopped him.

No one welcomed him.

I waited a moment, then rose too, letting my napkin fall beside my untouched wine.

“Where are you going?” Gianna asked.

I met her eyes. “To find my son.”

The room went still.

It was a small thing.

A single word.

My.

But in a family like ours, words were sharper than bullets.

I found him in the garden, sitting near the broken fountain Luca still hadn’t repaired.

The moonlight turned his face silver, younger than usual.

He looked up when I sat beside him, but said nothing.

I didn’t speak either.

I just waited.

Eventually, he whispered, “I don’t think they want me here.”

“They don’t,” I said truthfully.

His shoulders tensed.

I reached out, brushing a leaf from his hair. He didn’t flinch.

“But that doesn’t matter,” I continued. “You’re not here for them.”

He looked at me. “Then who?”

“You.”

“And your husband.”

He didn’t say “father.”

Not yet.

I didn’t correct him.

“Adriano hates me,” he muttered.

“No. He fears you.”

He scoffed. “He’s bigger. Older. Trained.”

“He’s spent his whole life trying to prove he’s the heir Alessandro needs.”

“And now I’m here.”

“Yes.”

“And he thinks he’s lost.”

“Not yet.”

He leaned back, staring at the stars.

“I don’t want to steal anything,” he said.

“I know.”

“But I won’t bow either.”

I smiled faintly. “That’s why you’re a Bellini.”

Later that night, I found Adriano in the armory.

Shirtless. Blood on his knuckles. He’d shattered the old oak training post.

I didn’t speak until he did.

“You shouldn’t defend him.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” he snapped. “You call him your son.”

“He is.”

“He’s not your blood.”

I stepped closer.

“And yet I love him more than anyone who’s ever had my blood.”

His jaw tightened.

“You think he’s better than us.”

“No,” I said softly. “I think he survived something none of you could have. And that scares you.”

He looked away.

Then finally, he whispered, “What if he is better?”

I touched his arm.

“Then learn from him. Or be left behind.”

That night, I lay beside Alessandro in silence.

His hand rested on my stomach, soft and warm.

I whispered, “They won’t accept him easily.”

“I know.”

“But if they don’t…”

His hand tensed.

“Then they’ll lose me, too,” I finished.

He turned his head. Kissed my temple. Didn’t speak.

He didn’t have to.

The war inside the house had begun.

And I was ready to fight.

Chapter Fifty-Eight: Matteo

He stood where I used to.

On the edge of the firelight. Not quite in the family. Not quite out.

It’s a strange place, that edge.

And once you’ve lived there… you never forget the cold.

I watched Emilio from the balcony. Below, in the south courtyard, he trained alone. Shirt soaked in sweat, fists bloodied. He hadn’t spoken to any of us in two days.

And honestly, I didn’t blame him.

Adriano ignored him. Luca walked past like he wasn’t there. Gianna, though… she watched. Quietly. Closely.

And me?

I didn’t know what I felt.

At first, I wanted him gone. Thought he was a threat.

But threats don’t train alone in the dark.

Threats don’t cry when they think no one’s watching.

I saw him once. Just for a second. Sitting on the edge of the fountain. Shoulders shaking. And I knew.

He didn’t want to conquer us.

He wanted to belong.

I slipped into my office, locking the door. Booted the encrypted drive Alessandro gave me three years ago when I turned eighteen.

He never said it, but I knew what it was for: secrets.

Family ones.

Enemies.

Loose ends.

I typed in Emilio’s full name.

No result.

Then: Marcella Benedetti. Milan. Twelve years ago.

One document loaded. A redacted CIA report.

Target: Marcella Benedetti

Status: Unknown

Subject: Child, Male, Born December 4

Father: Unconfirmed

Danger level: HIGH

Keywords: Trafficking, trained minors, psychological manipulation.

I leaned back.

I wasn’t breathing.

A child raised for blood.

He hadn’t just been kept from us.

He’d been made into something else.

Weaponized.

And yet… he came here. Not to fight. Not to destroy.

To find us.

To find himself.

I closed the file. Shut the laptop. Pushed away from the desk.

Downstairs, the sound of the punching bag echoed through the halls.

I followed it.

When I entered the gym, he didn’t stop.

Didn’t even glance.

His fists flew like fire — controlled, exact, and deadly.

But he was tired.

Bone tired.

After another minute, he dropped to the mat.

I waited.

Then sat beside him.

“You're good,” I said finally.

He didn’t reply.

Just breathed.

“I looked you up.”

He tensed. Barely.

“You were trained. Not raised.”

“By your definition.”

“By any.”

He turned his head.

“I didn’t choose it.”

“I know.”

He frowned. “Why are you here?”

“Because I wanted to hate you.”

“And now?”

“I’m not sure.”

Silence.

Then: “Do you think your father wants me here?”

I looked him in the eye.

“No. I think he needs you here.”

He blinked.

“What if I never fit?”

“None of us do. We just fake it better.”

A beat passed.

Then he smiled. Just barely.

“Even Adriano?”

I laughed. “Especially Adriano.”

Before I left, I handed him something.

A key.

“To what?”

“My library. It’s quiet. Hidden. No one bothers me there.”

He looked at it like it was a grenade.

“Why give me this?”

I shrugged.

“Because I’ve seen enough wolves to recognize when one’s trying not to bite.”

As I turned to go, he said something.

Not loud. Not strong.

But real.

“Thanks.”

And in that single word, I heard it all.

Loneliness.

Fear.

Hope.

He was one of us.

And maybe... I was the first to say it.

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Alessandro

The first bullet wasn’t meant to kill.

It was meant to send a message.

And the message was clear:

We know where you live. We know what you hide. And we’re coming.

I stood at the northern balcony as the guards pulled the body from the gate. A courier. Young. No ties. Bullet between his knees.

Classic Benedetti signature.

I hadn’t seen it in eighteen years.

Not since Marcella disappeared.

Not since I left her bleeding on a cold Milanese floor.

I thought she was dead.

Apparently, I was wrong.

“Sir,” Dante approached. “This was in his hand.”

A note. Folded. Black ink on white vellum. Expensive paper. Italian stock.

My name was on the outside.

Inside: one sentence.

“You stole from me once. I will take everything.”

There was no signature.

There didn’t need to be.

I went straight to the war room. Matteo was already there, standing over the map. His fingers traced supply routes, guard schedules, territory lines.

He didn’t look up.

“She’s back,” I said.

Still no reaction.

“She wants him.”

This time he glanced at me.

“She can’t have him,” he said simply.

“No.”

“Does Adriano know?”

“Not yet.”

“We’ll need him.”

I sighed. “We’ll need all of you.”

Matteo nodded.

Then, softly: “He’s not ready.”

“He’ll never be.”

“But he’s ours.”

I looked at my youngest.

And for the first time… he looked like a man.

Later that evening, I found Isabella on the back stairs. She always went there when she needed air. Or distance.

She held her phone tightly, screen glowing.

“What is it?” I asked.

She didn’t answer.

I took the phone from her hand.

It was a message. From an unknown number.

A photo of Emilio.

Tied. Beaten. Bleeding. But not recent. A memory.

One meant to unmake her.

Under the photo, four words:

“You made him soft.”

She didn’t cry.

But her silence cracked the walls of my heart

“We move him to the south wing,” I said. “Dante doubles security. Matteo handles internal sweeps.”

“And Adriano?”

“Still too angry.”

“And Luca?”

“Too loyal to see straight.”

She turned her eyes to me.

And whispered: “Then what do you do?”

I looked at the photo again.

I didn’t recognize the boy in it.

But I knew what had been done to him.

And I knew who did it.

“I kill a ghost,” I said.

At midnight, I went into my private vault.

Not the family one.

Mine.

The place only I knew.

I opened the steel drawer.

Took out a black velvet box.

Inside: a blade.

Small. Curved. Silver hilt. Ivory handle.

Benedetti-made.

Given to me by Marcella when I turned twenty-four.

“Use it when words fail,” she’d whispered.

Now the words had failed.

And the blade had purpose.

Back upstairs, I stopped at Emilio’s room.

He wasn’t sleeping.

He never slept deeply.

I opened the door anyway.

He sat up.

Eyes on mine.

“What happened?” he asked.

“She’s alive.”

He didn’t ask who.

He didn’t need to.

“What does she want?”

“You.”

He said nothing.

Then: “What do you want?”

“To protect you.”

He stood.

Walked to the window.

Hands clasped behind his back — just like I used to do.

“She trained me,” he said.

“Yes.”

“She hurt me.”

“I know.”

“She’s still my mother.”

I looked at his reflection in the glass.

And said, “And I am still your father.”

Silence.

Then:

“Then let me help.”

“No.”

“I can handle her.”

“I know.”

“Then why”

“Because I will not lose another son to war.”

His jaw clenched.

Then, finally, he nodded.

Once.

Not because he agreed. But because he understood.

And for now… that was enough.

Chapter Sixty: Gianna

Some ghosts don’t haunt you with chains.

They haunt you with truth.

And tonight, truth wore a tailored coat and a half-smile that still made my stomach twist.

He waited exactly where I told him to — the old greenhouse in the eastern wing of the villa. No one had stepped inside it in years. Not even Alessandro. He'd locked it long ago, as if pain could be sealed behind glass and steel.

But memories always find a way back in.

"Gianna Bellini," he said, voice smooth as the old days. "You haven't changed."

"And you," I said flatly, "now smell of death instead of wine."

He smiled.

"Wine ages. Death doesn't."

There was something in his eyes — sharp, like he hadn't come just to see me. He had come to gift me something. Or destroy me with it.

"Say what you came to say, Raffaele."

His name cut like a blade through my chest. A cursed name. A cursed man.

Once, I loved him.

Once, I thought he'd be the end of me.

Maybe he still would be.

"You have a boy in that house," he said. "But you are not his mother."

"And?"

"He's looking for blood. I hold the answers."

I studied him closely. He had always been a master manipulator. But now? Now he was something more.

A keeper of truths.

And I wanted every one of them.

"Marcella didn't leave that place with just one child," he said. "She had another. Smaller. Weaker. She chose."

My breath caught.

"What are you saying?"

"She took Emilio. Left the other."

He stepped closer.

"Think he's dangerous now? Imagine what his brother grew into."

My lungs locked.

There were no records of a second child. No names. No files.

But if anyone knew, it was Raffaele.

He was her shadow. Her keeper. Her sin.

“Where is he?” I asked.

He handed me a small black USB drive.

“It’s all there. But know this — the truth will destroy Alessandro.”

“He’ll survive it.”

“I’m not talking about him.”

He looked me dead in the eyes.

“I’m talking about Emilio.”

I stood frozen.

The drive weighed nothing. But in my hand, it felt like a weapon.

“If you love him… stop this,” Raffaele said. “Because his brother isn’t coming to love. He’s coming to finish what Marcella started.”

He turned away without another word.

I stayed.

Alone. With silence that screamed.

With truth that burned.

An hour later, I sat in my room, staring at the USB drive.

Behind my door, Alessandro’s shadow passed. His light shone under the crack.

My brother.

My king.

And me?

I held the key to his ruin.

Chapter Sixty-One: Emilio

There’s a feeling you get when someone talks about you behind your back — a static itch between your shoulder blades, a restless sense of being observed.

I had that feeling all day.

It started with the glances. Quiet ones from Gianna. Measured ones from Alessandro.

And then there was silence.

The kind of silence that didn’t belong in a house like ours — not with six brothers, two bodyguards, and three kitchens always running.

No. This silence had weight.

And it was wrapped around me.

I stood on the balcony outside my room, looking down at the courtyard where Alessandro usually trained before dinner. Today, it was empty.

Too quiet.

I looked to the left — and saw Gianna standing by her window.

She didn’t wave.

She didn’t blink.

She just closed the curtain.

Later that night, I passed through the east wing, near the old greenhouse. A strange instinct told me to pause.

The door had been locked since we were kids.

But tonight, it wasn’t.

A faint smell of dust and jasmine lingered in the air, and when I reached for the knob, it was cold. My pulse slowed.

I wasn’t supposed to be here.

But the part of me that had survived Marcella's prison didn’t obey rules.

I opened the door.

The air inside was thick with time.

Faded roses. Dead vines. Broken glass underfoot.

And… footprints.

Fresh.

I bent down, touched the dirt. Someone had been here within hours.

The kind of someone who didn’t want to be seen.

I rose quickly and turned to leave — only to find Luca blocking the entrance.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he said quietly.

“I wasn’t aware I needed permission.”

Luca didn’t smile. He rarely did.

“Your brother said this wing is off-limits.”

“And since when do I care?”

He didn’t move. Just folded his arms.

“Since what’s inside might break you?”

That’s when I knew.

Something had shifted.

Not just in the house — in the family.

And it had everything to do with me.

That night, I found Alessandro in the underground garage, cleaning his gun.

He didn’t look up when I walked in.

“You’ve been quiet,” I said.

He kept polishing the barrel.

“Some truths aren’t meant to be spoken. They’re meant to be felt.”

I stepped closer.

“Tell me who he is.”

Alessandro finally looked up.

“Who?”

“The man in the greenhouse. The man Gianna met.”

A pause.

“You were followed.”

“I followed her.”

Another pause.

Then, finally, Alessandro set the gun down.

And said nothing.

Which told me everything.

I left before he could stop me.

If he wouldn’t give me the answers, I’d find them myself.

And I knew exactly who to go to.

Gianna.

The woman who raised us like her own.

The woman who now looked at me like a ghost.

I found her sitting in her private study, staring at a USB drive in her hand.

She didn’t flinch when I entered.

“I need to know,” I said.

She didn’t speak.

“Please,” I added.

Her eyes lifted slowly to mine.

Then, silently, she extended her hand.

And dropped the drive into my palm.

“Don’t open it,” she whispered, “unless you’re ready to lose everything you thought was yours.”

The USB was small. Black. Innocent-looking.

But I knew better.

Whatever was on it... had already started to destroy the people I loved.

And maybe that was the point.

Chapter Sixty-Two: Alessandro

I’ve always believed in control.

Not love.

Not fate.

Not family.

Control.

Because when you grow up Bellini, you learn fast that the world doesn’t give you second chances — it gives you weapons. And if you don’t pick them up, someone else will use them on you.

I made peace with that truth early. At seventeen, I held my first gun. At twenty, I buried my first enemy. At twenty-three, I became my father's heir not because he wanted me to

But because I didn’t leave him a choice.

And yet, the one thing I could never control…

Was him.

Emilio.

The first time I held him, he was barely two. Wild eyes. Scarred wrists. Terrified of every noise that echoed in the villa. A child shaped by cruelty, and yet—there was something about him. Something fragile. Something pure.

Even back then, I knew he didn’t belong in our world.

And yet he was ours.

He was mine.

My baby brother.

Even if I hadn’t been the one to name him.

Even if I hadn’t been the one to bring him home.

Even if… I hadn’t been told the full truth.

Not until Gianna came to me five years later—white as a ghost, a file in her hand, tears in her eyes.

“Marcella lied,” she whispered.

I took the file.

Inside were two birth certificates. Two DNA reports. Two identical boys.

Twins.

But only one had made it out of that prison alive.

Or so we thought.

Turns out… the truth has claws. And it doesn’t stay buried.

Now, years later, it was clawing its way back into our lives.

Piece by piece. Glance by glance.

Until Emilio stood in front of me, his eyes no longer innocent.

No longer fragile.

But hard. Searching. Demanding.

“Tell me,” he’d said.

And I didn’t.

Because I didn’t know how.

How do you tell the brother you raised that there’s another version of him out there—born in the same pain, abandoned in the same place, but raised by someone else?

How do you tell him he might not be the only one with that smile… that rage… that blood?

How do you say you’re not alone—but not in the way you hoped?

I went to the armory that night. Not to train. Not to fight.

But to breathe.

The air in this house had grown heavy. Every corridor whispered secrets. Every door led to something I’d buried.

Luca found me cleaning the same pistol for over an hour.

“You going to tell him?” he asked.

I didn’t look up.

“Not yet.”

“He already knows there’s something.”

“He doesn’t know what.”

Luca stepped closer, voice quiet.

“If his brother is alive… and working for Raffaele”

I cut him off.

“We don’t know that.”

“We do know Raffaele’s been moving through Milan. Quietly. Cutting deals. Gathering names. He’s coming for something.”

I stood.

“He’s coming for us.”

And Emilio…

Was the key.

Later that night, I found Isabella in the library. She was reading, but not really. Her fingers kept tracing the edge of a page, never turning it.

She looked up when I entered, worry etched in every inch of her face.

“Is it true?” she asked softly.

I said nothing.

She closed the book.

“If Emilio has a brother…”

“When he finds out,” I corrected. “It’ll change everything.”

She nodded slowly.

“And what about us?”

I met her eyes.

And for a moment, I saw the future I’d fought so hard for—our family, safe. My brothers alive. A wedding. A child in my arms.

A world I couldn’t have unless I finally tore down the lies I’d built to protect them.

But some walls aren’t meant to fall.

Not yet.

“Don’t give up on him,” she whispered. “He needs you now more than ever.”

And I knew she was right.

Even if Emilio hated me for the truth.

Even if I lost him.

He deserved to know who he really was.

Who he really is.

I stayed in the library long after she left.

Staring at the fire.

Wondering how much longer I could keep pretending that everything wasn’t already on fire.

Chapter Sixty-Three: Isabella

There was a time, not so long ago, when I believed silence was peace.

Now, I realize it’s simply the sound that fills a room right before a secret explodes.

And there were too many secrets in this house.

The worst part?

Most of them had names.

Emilio had changed.

It was subtle at first—less smiling, more watching. He moved through the villa like a man navigating a minefield, always a little on edge, always sensing something no one else could see.

But it wasn’t fear I saw in him.

It was purpose.

The kind of purpose born from pain.

And I knew that look because I wore it myself once, when I first entered this world. When I first realized love could bloom in the most dangerous places—and still bleed you dry.

I watched him from the second-floor landing as he stood in the garden, talking to no one. Just standing, staring at the statue of Saint Michael, sword drawn, wings spread.

Fitting, really.

The protector.

The punisher.

The fallen.

Later that day, I passed by Gianna’s room and heard the sound of drawers opening and closing, quietly but quickly. I knocked. No answer.

I opened the door.

She was standing by the mirror, her expression pale, holding something in her hands.

A small black notebook.

“Is that…?”

Gianna turned, startled. She wasn’t the kind of woman who startled easily.

Her fingers clenched around the book.

“It’s nothing,” she said. But her voice trembled.

“You’re lying,” I replied gently.

She sighed.

Sat down on the edge of her bed.

And said five words that chilled me.

> “He doesn’t know the whole truth.”

“Alessandro?”

She shook her head.

“Emilio.”

She handed me the notebook without another word. The pages were handwritten, worn, some stained with old watermarks.

It was a journal.

A mother’s journal.

Marcella Bellini.

The entries weren’t dated, but they were vivid.

> “They told me only one survived. That’s what they always say. One child, one body, one life. But I heard the other cry. I know I did. I know I did.”

> “The nun came today. Her hands were clean. Too clean. She smiled when she said my baby would be taken care of. Not mine. Theirs.”

> “Gianna suspects nothing. But Alessandro… he watches me with those eyes. I wonder if he’ll forgive me one day. I wonder if I deserve it.”

I felt sick.

Gianna sat quietly while I read. Her face was unreadable.

“She lied to everyone,” I whispered.

“Not just once,” Gianna said. “Not just to survive. But to build something else. Something dark. Something she couldn’t control.”

“She split them,” I said.

She nodded. “She made sure Emilio would never know. And she made sure no one would ever know the other boy existed.”

“But someone found him.”

“Yes,” Gianna said quietly. “And they turned him into a weapon.”

I put the journal down and looked at her, something cold twisting in my chest.

“What do we do now?”

Her answer was instant.

> “We tell Alessandro. But not before we’re certain. Because once this secret comes out…”

She paused.

> “…this family will never be the same again.”

That night, I found Emilio on the balcony again. Same statue. Same silence.

But this time, when I approached him, he turned before I reached him.

His eyes found mine.

And there was something in them I hadn’t seen before.

Not just sadness. Not just curiosity.

Rage.

Quiet, simmering rage.

“They’re hiding something,” he said.

I nodded.

“I know.”

He didn’t look surprised.

“I don’t know who I am anymore, Isabella.”

“You’re still you.”

He shook his head.

“What if I’m not?” His voice cracked. “What if I was never who they said I was?”

I stepped closer. I touched his hand.

And this time, he didn’t pull away.

“You’re mine,” I whispered. “And whatever we find… whoever you were… you’re still mine.”

He didn’t kiss me.

But he didn’t let go of my hand either.

And that, for now, was enough.

Chapter Sixty-Four: Emilio

Something inside me is cracking.

I don’t know when it started. Maybe it was the day I found that scar on my shoulder that no one could explain. Maybe it was the way Alessandro’s voice trembled when I asked him about my mother. Maybe it was Isabella’s eyes when she looked at me last night—like she wanted to tell me something but couldn’t.

Or maybe it’s been happening since I was born. A slow, invisible fracture. A wound carried so deep, I didn’t even realize it was bleeding.

Until now.

I walk the halls like a ghost. The villa is too quiet. Every room echoes with things left unsaid. I hear them in the floorboards. I feel them in the walls.

There’s a portrait in the upstairs gallery—an old Bellini ancestor with stormy eyes and a blade in his hand. I used to think he looked like Alessandro.

Now I wonder if he looks like me.

Or… someone else.

Someone I don’t know.

I find myself in the archives.

It’s a dark room buried beneath the west wing, filled with ledgers, photographs, files. Organized chaos. The kind of place only Alessandro or Luca ever really enter.

But I’m not supposed to be here.

And that’s exactly why I came.

I pry open one of the locked cabinets. Inside: documents. Old and new. Code names. Safe house blueprints. But tucked at the back, under a manila folder

A sealed envelope.

With my name on it.

In Alessandro’s handwriting.

I stare at it for a long time.

My hand shakes as I break the seal.

Inside is a photo.

Two babies. Identical.

Labeled: Emilio & Dante. October 4.

And beneath it, one sentence in Alessandro’s handwriting.

> I tried to protect you both. I failed one. I will not fail again.

The floor disappears beneath me.

I don’t remember leaving the archives.

I don’t remember walking back to my room.

I don’t even remember locking the door.

But I’m sitting on the bed now, the photo in my hand, my entire world unraveling like a wire pulled too tight for too long.

I was never alone.

And they never told me.

Alessandro

There’s a knock on the office door.

I don’t answer.

I know who it is.

Gianna doesn’t wait. She enters, holding Marcella’s journal.

“She knows,” she says simply.

My stomach tightens. “Who?”

“Isabella.”

I close the ledger in front of me. “And Emilio?”

Gianna pauses. “Soon.”

I stand. Walk to the window. The vineyard outside is still green, untouched by the frost creeping into Milan. But that frost is coming.

And I can’t stop it anymore.

I told myself I was protecting him.

That no one needed to know about Dante—not when we couldn’t be sure what had happened to him. Not when the people who took him were capable of anything.

But I was lying to myself.

I didn’t hide the truth to protect Emilio.

I hid it to protect me.

Because if he found out…

He might never look at me the same way again.

Luca enters without knocking.

“There’s a problem,” he says.

“What kind?”

“Someone broke into the archives.”

My blood runs cold.

“Let me guess,” I say. “He found the envelope.”

Luca nods.

Silence settles between us.

“We should’ve told him,” he says.

“I know.”

“You still can.”

I look at the clock.

“I think it’s too late.”

Emilio

I don’t wait for the sun to rise.

I go to his office.

I don’t knock.

He’s at the window, his back to me.

He doesn’t turn around.

“Did you read it?” he asks.

“Yes.”

Silence.

My voice is raw when I speak again.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He turns slowly. His eyes are tired. Older than I’ve ever seen them.

“I was afraid.”

“Of what? Me?”

“No. Of losing you.”

I laugh. Bitter.

“You never had me to begin with.”

His jaw tightens. “Don’t say that.”

“Then tell me something real, Alessandro. Something true.”

He walks over to the desk. Opens a drawer.

Pulls out a second photo.

This one is of a boy.

Older. Same eyes. Same face.

But the expression…

Hard. Empty.

“Dante,” he says.

I take the photo.

It feels like holding a mirror to a version of me that never learned to love.

“Where is he?”

“We don’t know. But he’s alive.”

“And you think he’s working for Raffaele.”

“We know he is.”

My breath catches.

He looks at me.

“No one’s supposed to survive what you survived,” he says. “And yet, you both did. That means something, Emilio. That means something.”

I look down at the photo again.

And for the first time in my life, I feel like I’m staring into my own shadow.

Chapter Sixty-Five: Isabella

The moment I saw Emilio standing outside Alessandro's office, pale and tense with something unreadable in his eyes, I knew the truth had broken through.

He didn't look at me when he passed. Not with curiosity, not with softness, not with pain. Just silence. Cold, steel silence. The kind I had once believed him incapable of.

It told me everything.

I waited until the heavy doors of the study closed behind him before I took the back hallway to the east courtyard. The air was thick with autumn. Faint hints of smoke, wind, and something dying under the vines.

The Bellini vineyard never slept. Even now, men moved among the rows, pruning the roots before winter. Life went on, oblivious to the tremors rippling through its core.

Inside the greenhouse, I found Luna. She was tending to the orchids again, gloved hands gently tying back violet stems.

"He knows," I said.

She didn't turn. She just kept working.

"I figured," she murmured.

"You told him?"

"No. Alessandro left a letter in the archives. Emilio found it."

My stomach turned.

"Does he know about Dante? About the photo?"

"Yes."

She stood up straight then, finally facing me. Her expression wasn't full of fear like mine. It was calm. A little resigned. A little proud.

"He has a right to the truth, Isa."

"And what about the danger it brings with it?"

She gave me a look I'd seen once before. The night she told me that Alessandro had sent her to spy on my father.

"You can't shield him from his past. Just like Alessandro couldn't shield us."

I wanted to scream. But I knew she was right.

We were all born in the dark.

And now it was catching up to us.

Back in my room, I stared at the mirror.

How long could I keep pretending?

This wasn't about mafia empires anymore. Not about money, blood, or power.

This was about identity.

Family.

Love.

And secrets.

Always secrets.

I had one more. One even Alessandro didn't know.

Emilio had kissed me last night.

And I kissed him back.

I told myself it was adrenaline. Grief. Desperation.

But it wasn't.

It was the beginning.

Of everything we could no longer outrun.

Later that night...

I found him in the cellar. He was sitting in the shadows beside a case of aged Chianti, turning a silver coin between his fingers.

He didn't look at me when I came in. But he spoke.

"You knew."

I sat down slowly.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Almost a year."

He nodded. Slowly. The silence stretched between us, wide and unforgiving.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

I closed my eyes. "Because I was afraid you'd hate Alessandro. And once you did... there'd be no going back."

"You were right."

My breath caught.

"I don't hate him," he added softly. "But I don't know if I trust him either."

We were quiet again.

Then he turned to me.

"Isabella... do you think I'm like him? Like Dante?"

I looked at him. Really looked.

He was afraid.

Not of violence. Not of truth.

Of himself.

I reached for his hand.

"You are who you choose to be. Not who they made you."

And for the first time since this all began, he let his head fall to my shoulder.

And breathed.

That night, I dreamt of the Bellini brothers as boys. Six shadows running through the vineyard. One missing. One lost.

And a storm gathering over the horizon.

Chapter Sixty-Six: Alessandro

The room smelled of firewood and lemon oil. Faint echoes of my father’s study still clung to the dark oak shelves and the scent of old cigars. But his ghost no longer haunted this place. Not really. Only the memory of choices. Of echoes.

I was staring at the old painting above the fireplace—a scene from Palermo, fishermen dragging nets at dawn—when Nicolo entered.

"Emilio left," he said.

I didn’t turn.

"I know."

"He didn’t say where."

"He doesn’t have to."

Nicolo sighed, the sound tired, older than his twenty-seven years.

"We should've told him sooner."

"It wouldn't have changed the outcome."

"Maybe not. But it would've changed the betrayal."

That made me turn.

"Do you think I wanted this?"

He said nothing.

I walked to the window and looked out over the estate. Beyond the vineyard, the hills were golden with the last kiss of the October sun. But all I saw was the space where Emilio had stood the day he first shot a gun. The same day I promised our mother I'd protect them all.

"You were kids, Ale. You made a promise no one could keep."

I closed my eyes.

"And yet here we are."

By midnight, the estate was silent. Even the guards outside had dulled into their third coffees, their radios muted.

I walked the halls alone. Old portraits stared back at me.

Bellinis with pride in their eyes and secrets in their hands.

In the archive room, I sat at the desk and unfolded the last letter my father ever wrote.

The ink had faded, but his words were sharp. Still biting.

If he ever learns the truth, you will lose him.

But if you lie, you will lose yourself.

Choose, Alessandro.

I had chosen.

And now I was watching the cost.

At dawn, I found Isabella in the chapel.

She was lighting a candle, her hair a dark waterfall against the velvet pews. I sat beside her, our silence almost holy.

"He kissed you," I said.

She didn't deny it.

"I don't blame you."

She looked at me, eyes full of storm and sorrow.

"Do you still love me?"

I didn't answer.

Not because I didn’t know.

But because love wasn’t the question anymore.

The question was whether love was enough.

And that, even I couldn’t answer.

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Isabella

I sat on the cold marble steps of the chapel long after Alessandro left.

The candlelight flickered in my periphery, the scent of wax and incense clinging to my skin like the remnants of something sacred we’d already broken. My hands were trembling. I didn’t know if it was from what he said, or what he didn’t.

He didn’t deny he loved me.

But he also didn’t promise me anything. No vow. No future.

The kind of silence that wounds deeper than words.

I remembered the day I first saw him.

Not the public Alessandro Bellini, the heir in suits and shadows, but the man beneath. I was seventeen, watching him from the hallway of my father’s villa as he brokered a truce between two men who would rather bleed than speak.

He never raised his voice.

He didn’t have to.

That kind of power... it wasn't taught.

It was born.

And even then, something in me knew it would destroy us both.

When I finally rose, my legs were stiff and cold. I wandered into the orchard behind the chapel. It was overgrown now, vines curling around old stone walls, figs drooping from neglected trees.

There was something beautiful in the decay.

Like us.

I found Luna there, barefoot, wearing one of Nico’s oversized shirts. She looked like a ghost from another life.

"Couldn’t sleep?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"He knows. About the kiss."

Luna nodded. "Did he say anything?"

"No. But he didn’t need to."

We sat in silence, the wind rustling through fig leaves.

"Do you love them both?" she asked.

I swallowed. "I think I love what Emilio could be. I love Alessandro for what he never let himself become.”

Luna tilted her head. "That sounds like a prison."

"Maybe it is."

Later that morning, chaos returned to the estate.

The men from Milan had arrived early. A meeting of the Families. Not just Bellini allies, but rivals. The kind of gathering that meant something tectonic was shifting under our feet.

I watched from the mezzanine as the parlor filled with dark suits and colder eyes. Alessandro moved among them like a ghost, all calm calculation.

But I saw the tremor in his left hand.

I saw the storm rising behind his silence.

And I saw Emilio return.

He entered without a word, his coat still damp from the rain outside. His eyes scanned the room, but they didn't seek me. They found Alessandro.

The two brothers locked eyes.

It lasted three seconds.

But it shook the floor more than any gunfire could have.

That night, I sat in my bedroom window, watching the moon rise.

I thought of all the Bellini brothers.

Dante, the shadow.

Alessandro, the burden-bearer.

Emilio, the flame.

Nicolo, the conscience.

Marco, the mirror.

And Luca... the one still lost.

Their legacies were written in blood, but also in the women who challenged them. Tamed them. Broke them. Healed them.

And I was one of them now.

Not by force. By choice.

But even choices had consequences and I feared mine had just begun to unfold.

Chapter Sixty-Eight: Alessandro

The rain hadn't stopped.

It slid down the bulletproof windows of my office like quiet accusations, each drops a memory I couldn't bury. Outside, the grounds of the Bellini estate stood soaked and somber. Inside, I sat at my father's old desk, the leather chair worn down by years of bad decisions. His ghost lingered more heavily than usual today.

They all expected me to lead.

But no one asked what it cost.

A knock. Then the door opened without waiting for permission.

Of course.

"You let him walk in like a prince returning from war," I said, not looking up.

Nico stepped inside, shaking off his umbrella. "He is your brother."

"So is Judas."

He raised an eyebrow. "I thought that was Dante."

I almost smiled. Almost.

"Emilio didn’t betray us."

"He betrayed me. That’s enough."

Nico sat across from me. For a long time, we didn’t speak. Just the tick of the old clock and the soft thud of thunder in the distance.

Finally, he said, "You can’t keep treating your heart like a casualty of war."

I looked at him.

"She kissed him, Nico. And he kissed her back."

Nico exhaled. "And yet, she’s still here. And you still love her."

I didn’t answer.

Because silence was safer than truth.

That afternoon, I walked through the vineyards alone. The sky was iron-gray, the wind teasing my coat like it had something to say. Every stone I stepped on had a story. Every vine had been planted by blood.

My family didn’t grow grapes.

We cultivated loyalty.

And fear.

And the kind of silence that made men kneel.

But I wanted more.

I wanted something honest.

And she made me want it.

Isabella.

I saw her that evening, by the stables. Feeding the horses in that ridiculous wool coat she always wore like armor. Her hair was pulled up, but the wind kept pulling strands loose. She was beautiful in a way that hurt.

I didn’t approach.

Not at first.

Because I didn’t trust myself not to ask her the one question I didn’t want the answer to:

Would she choose him over me, if it had been different?

But then she turned as if sensing me. Our eyes met.

"Are you going to keep punishing me for a mistake I already regret?" she asked.

Her voice was steady.

I walked toward her, slow and measured, until I was close enough to see the fear she tried to hide.

"I’m not punishing you," I said. "I’m punishing myself for believing I was enough."

Her breath hitched.

"You were. You are."

I laughed, bitter. "Then why does it feel like I’m losing you?"

She took a step forward, and I let her. Her hand brushed my arm. Warm. Real.

"Because you won’t let me stay. Not really."

And there it was.

Truth.

The kind that tore down walls and rebuilt them.

I touched her face. Let myself feel the tremble in her jaw.

"I still don’t know how to love without fear."

"Then let me teach you."

We stood there as the storm broke open, thunder crashing above us, rain pouring down like absolution.

And I kissed her like it was the first time.

The last time.

The only time that ever mattered.

Later, in the darkness of my room, she lay beside me.

Her head was on my chest.

And I finally told her the secret I never told anyone.

"My father made me promise, before he died, that I would never let love weaken me."

She lifted her head. "And did it?"

I looked at her.

"No. It made me stronger. It made me human."

Chapter Sixty-Nine: Isabella

The morning after the storm, the Bellini estate felt different. Lighter, somehow. As if the earth had taken a deep breathe and let it out after years of holding it in.

I stood on the balcony outside Alessandro’s room, the vineyard stretching endlessly below, washed clean by the rain. The vines shimmered like emerald veins beneath the sun. It was beautiful—deceptively peaceful.

But I knew better.

Peace didn’t come easily to men like Alessandro.

It had to be fought for.

Earned.

We had spent most of the night in silence after he told me about his father’s dying words. Not because there was nothing left to say, but because the truth was finally enough.

He had let me in.

And I stayed.

Later that day, the brothers gathered in the war room.

All six Bellini men in one place.

Dante stood by the window, fingers steeple. Emilio leaned against the wall, arms crossed, watching me with something like remorse. Marco scribbled notes, while Nicolo tapped his fingers against a mug of cold espresso. Luca sat in a chair backward, expression unreadable.

Alessandro stood at the head of the table.

He was no longer just the heir.

He was the Don.

He looked at each of them, then at me.

"We rebuild," he said simply.

It wasn’t a request.

It was an oath.

The wedding came two weeks later.

Small. Private. In the chapel where we once argued under candlelight and silence.

Now, it held music.

And laughter.

And vows.

"With you, I am not a weapon," he whispered as he slid the ring onto my finger.

"And with you, I am not afraid," I replied.

One year later

The sun filtered through the nursery window. Warm, golden. I sat in the rocker, holding our daughter.

Lucia.

Named after the light we found in each other’s darkness.

Alessandro stood in the doorway, silent for a moment, before he crossed the room and knelt beside me.

He brushed a finger along Lucia’s cheek, then looked up at me with eyes that had seen war, betrayal, and redemption.

"She’ll never grow up in a house built on silence," he said.

"No," I whispered. "She'll grow up in a home built on love."

We didn't erase our scars.

We wore them.

Together.

Epilogue: Alessandro

Five years have passed since the night I buried my father's sins and vowed never to pass them on.

Five years since I chose love over legacy.

And still, there are mornings when I wake before the sun, heart pounding, convinced that the past has finally caught up to me. But then I turn, and she's there—curled into the sheets, her hand instinctively reaching for mine in her sleep. Isabella. The only person who ever dared to see the man beneath the monster?

She gave me more than love.

She gave me peace.

Our daughter, Lucia, is almost five now. She's got her mother's fire and my silence. She speaks her mind, challenges everything, and already has the entire Bellini estate wrapped around her little finger. My brothers spoil her. Dante is her guardian

when I can’t be, Luca teaches her how to lie for fun, and Nicolo sneaks her sweets behind Isabella’s back.

I never thought we’d all still be alive. Let alone happy.

The family business still breathes—but it no longer bleeds. We’ve rebuilt it from the ground up. No more human trafficking. No more blood-stained oaths. We protect our territory. We invest. We lead. It’s still dangerous, yes, but it’s no longer a graveyard of souls. I promised my daughter she wouldn’t grow up in a world built on silence, and I meant it.

Sometimes I wonder if my father would be proud.

But then I remember what he did, and I stopped caring.

Because I’m not him.

I became a better man the moment Isabella walked into my life. Not softer. Just… stronger in a different way. More dangerous when I need to be. More alive when I hold her. She’s carrying our second child now. Another girl, the doctor said. When she told me, I just smiled and kissed her belly.

More light.

More reasons to live.

At night, when the house is quiet and the vineyards whisper in the wind outside, I sit by Lucia’s bed and tell her stories. She thinks they’re make-believe. She doesn’t know they’re real. Not yet. One day, she’ll ask why we live behind tall gates and why her uncles carry guns under their suits. One day, I’ll tell her the truth.

But not today.

Today, she gets stories of warriors and queens. Of men with broken hearts and women who made them whole. She laughs when I change my voice to act out different characters, and every time she rests her head on my chest afterward, I swear I feel time stop.

Isabella joins me in the nursery sometimes. She leans in the doorway, arms wrapped around her belly, smiling like she holds the entire world beneath her skin. And maybe she does. Maybe we both do. Our world isn’t perfect—but it’s ours. Built from pain, restructured with love.

Built to last.

I didn’t know what legacy meant until now.

It’s not power.

It’s not fear.

It’s watching my daughter dance barefoot through the vineyards.

It’s Isabella falling asleep with her head on my chest.

It’s being a man I wouldn’t have recognized five years ago.

One who still carries scars?

But also one who no longer hides them.

I used to think redemption was a myth. A lie we tell ourselves before we put the gun to someone’s head. But I was wrong. Redemption is real. It comes slow. It comes with blood. It comes with sacrifice.

But it comes.

It came for me.

And every day I choose it again.

For her.

For them.

For myself.

THE END